

**'THE BEST FOR ALL OUR CHILDREN'**

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**A Survey by the Education and Training Inspectorate**

**A Follow-up to the Inspection of  
Special Educational Needs  
in the  
Pre-School Sector**



Providing Inspection Services for  
Department of Education  
Department for Employment and Learning  
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure



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### APPENDIX A

Summary of responses received from three Education and Library Boards (ELBs), two childcare partnerships and the Early Years Organisation (EYO)

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## Quantitative Terms

A number of quantitative terms are used in the report. These terms should be interpreted as follows:

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

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

Descriptor
Outstanding
Very good
Good
Satisfactory
Inadequate
Unsatisfactory

## Glossary of Terms

Statutory	-	includes nursery schools and nursery classes or units within a primary school, mostly attended by children between 3 and 4 years of age.
Voluntary/Private	-	includes playgroups and funded provision within day nurseries, attended by children in their pre-school year, prior to starting year 1 in primary school.
Overall	-	statutory and voluntary/private groups together.

## **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 During the school year 2005-2006, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) published 'The Best for all our Children', a survey of special educational needs (SEN) in the pre-school sector. The survey evaluated the provision for children with special educational needs in all types of Department of Education (DE) funded pre-school centres, and the contribution made by all the statutory and voluntary agencies involved in providing support.
- 1.2 The report clearly showed that there was too much variability, both geographically and across the different sectors which comprise pre-school, in the availability of expertise, funding and resources for children with special educational needs, and in the effectiveness of professional collaboration in meeting the children's needs. Many projects were funded in a short-term manner, resulting in patchy provision and considerable inconsistencies in the availability, quality and range of services and support available for the children. In addition, there was also a significant number of different bodies and agencies involved in special educational needs provision and support, with inadequate inter-agency collaboration or coherent strategic planning.
- 1.3 The 2006 report also identified the need to improve training, resources, support and access to specialised services, including the Educational Psychology Services of the Education and Library Boards (ELBs), if standards of provision were to improve. It was also recommended that DE develop a coherent and appropriately funded strategy to meet effectively the children's needs which involved other Departments and relevant statutory and voluntary agencies.

## **2. Summary of Main Findings**

- 2.1 The evidence from this follow-up survey shows that progress has been made in addressing the key areas for improvement identified in 2006 particularly within the voluntary/private sector where the provision for children with special educational needs is slowly improving. Much, however, remains to be done. In particular, there is a continuing disparity between the statutory and voluntary sectors in relation to the level of qualifications of the staff and the access to continuing professional development (CPD).

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2.2 The findings of this follow-up survey indicate that:

- for children with special educational needs within pre-school education, getting appropriate diagnosis at an early stage still remains too much of a lottery;
- there remains inconsistencies in the support available for young children identified with special educational needs and their parents;
- the use of effective strategies for early identification and intervention, involving pre-school staff and the range of health and education agencies, have yet to be realised in a consistent manner;
- although it is noteworthy that the provision for special educational needs within the voluntary/private sector is improving the pace of improvement needs to quicken; and
- there remains insufficient collaboration between the relevant Departments and the other statutory and voluntary agencies in the planning and delivery of appropriate support for children with special educational needs, the staff and the parents.

### **3. Methodology**

3.1 Between September 2006 and June 2009, the period since the original survey, over 280 pre-school inspections have taken place; the provision for SEN was evaluated and recorded in all of these inspections. As part of the follow-up survey, a small team of inspectors also undertook specific visits to a sample of pre-school centres; the visit had a particular emphasis on identification, assessment and provision for children identified with special educational needs or those children who require careful monitoring with aspects of their development and learning. The team also met with key personnel across the Departments, stakeholders and agencies with particular responsibilities for special educational needs, to listen to their views on the progress made, and on any particular developments or initiatives since the original survey.

3.2 In May 2009, the five ELBs and the Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs) were invited to complete a short proforma. Two Childcare Partnerships (CPs) and three ELBs responded. Two responses were also received from the

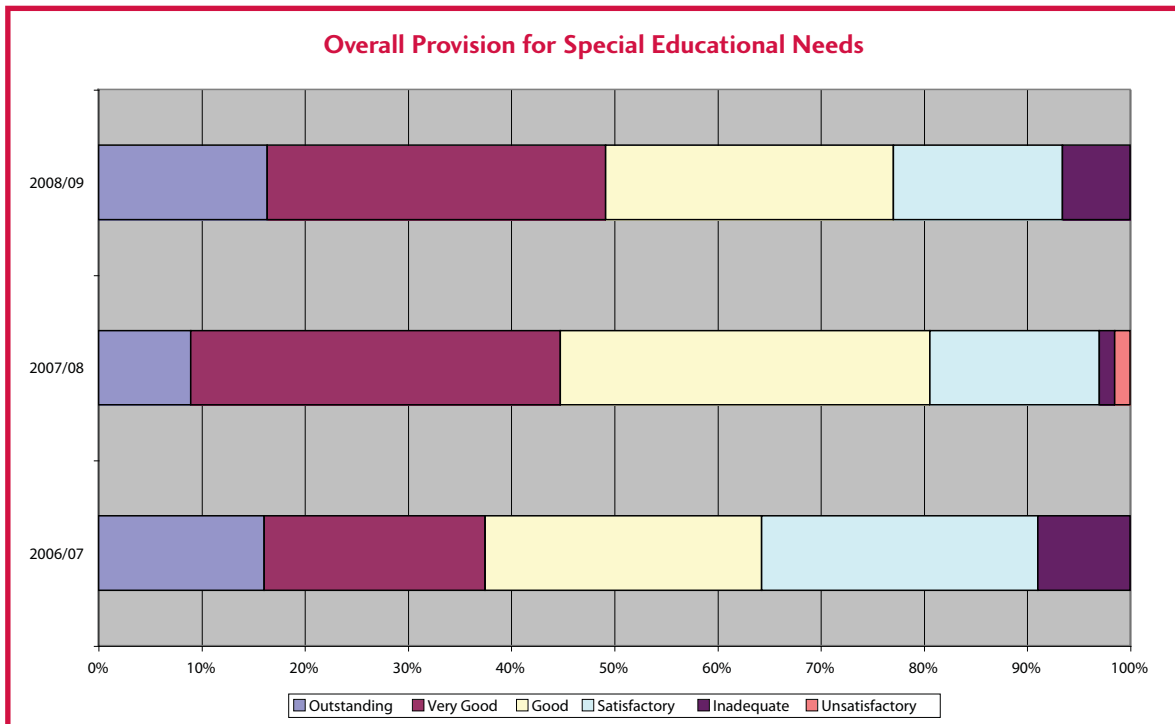
Early Years Organisation (EYO). The ETI collated and analysed these seven responses; a summary is contained in Appendix A.

3.3 This report summarises the findings from ETI follow-up survey visits and the inspections carried out between 2006-2009 (section 4). It focuses on the progress being made in achieving the improvements needed to meet more effectively the needs of young children with special or additional needs, the recurring issues (section 5) and provides further recommendations (section 6).

#### 4. Main Findings Emerging from the ETI Inspections and the Follow-Up Survey Visits

4.1 The inspections which took place between 2006 and 2009 (Figure 1) show an improving pattern for the overall provision for special educational needs in pre-school education. In 2008-09, for example, most of the provision (78%) was good or better. A minority of the provision (12%), while satisfactory, has important areas for improvement and around 10% of the provision was evaluated to be inadequate. In the original survey, the overall quality of provision was less than satisfactory in 20% of the centres.

Figure 1



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4.2 Almost all pre-school centres of all types continue to maintain good standards in the caring and supportive relationships established within the settings. Effective methods have been adopted to involve and inform the parents; these steps are encouraging them to contribute to, and participate in, decisions about their children's education and additional support.

Further examples of better practice observed include:

- the heightened value placed on home visits by the staff prior to the child commencing pre-school;
- the stronger focus by staff on the gathering of relevant background information on the child and the family as part of the settling-in process;
- a systematic approach to observing and monitoring the child's progress and development where initial concerns are noted or raised;
- a clearly defined role requiring each child's key worker to make additional observations for those children where some concerns are emerging;
- careful monitoring of those children with additional needs, documented through appropriate educational plans (EPs);
- the introduction of personalised record books outlining the daily activities and children's experiences of the day, both at pre-school and at home, along with the promotion of specific home targets; and
- effective open communication and developing partnerships established with the parents from the settling-in process.

The main areas of concern in both the satisfactory and inadequate provision continue to relate to staff expertise, training and development.

### The Quality of Provision

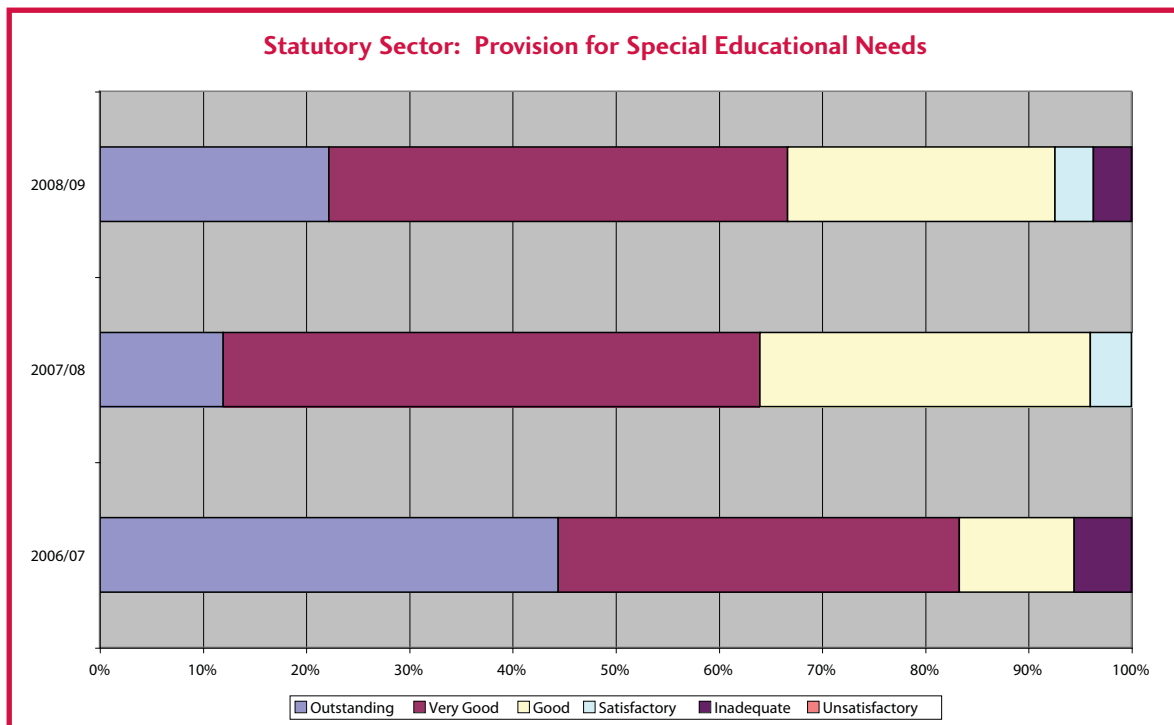
The quality of the provision in the **statutory sector** continues to remain stronger than that in the voluntary/private sector (Figures 2 and 3). This difference reflects the higher levels of resources available, particularly staff expertise. In almost all (92%) of the statutory centres inspected, the quality

of provision was good or better; in only 4% of these centres was the provision less than satisfactory. In the voluntary/private sector, the quality of provision for special educational needs was good or better in a majority (63%) of the centres; it was satisfactory in a further 28%, and inadequate in 9% of them.

The main strengths identified in the statutory settings included:

- the good links and contacts with the relevant agencies and associated access to expertise;
- the early and accurate identification of the children’s particular needs;
- the systematic and accurate tracking and recording of the children’s progress;
- the appropriate involvement of the parents; and
- the range and variety of appropriate resources.

Figure 2

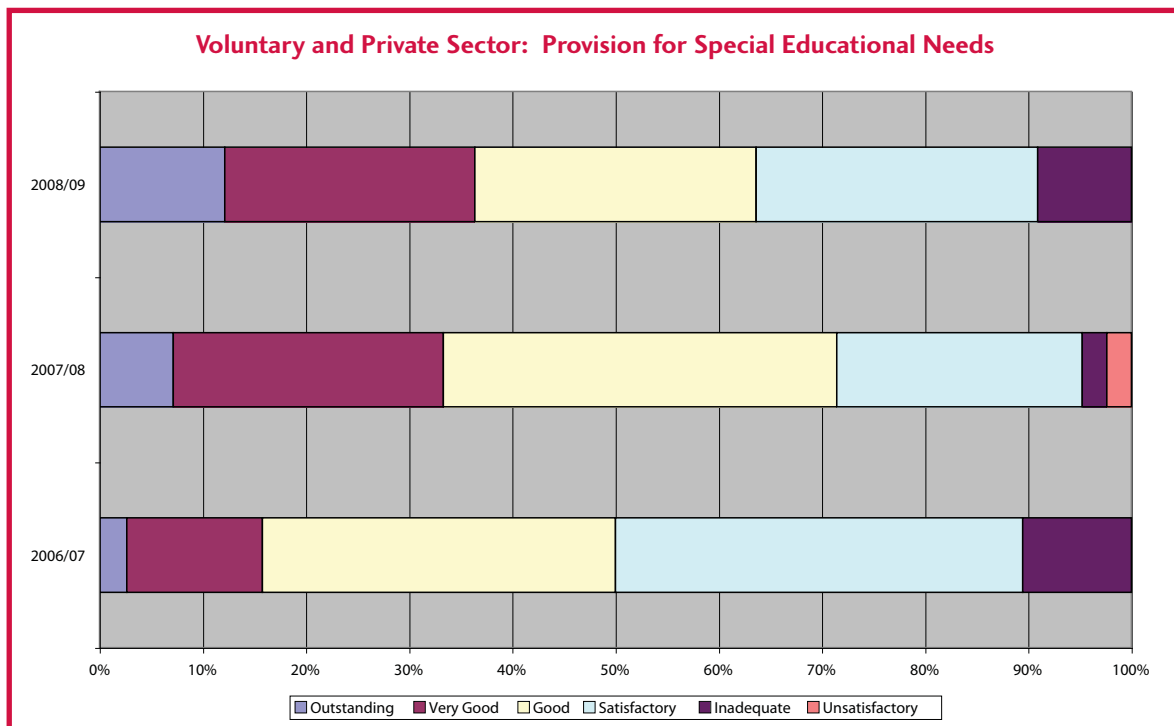




It is noteworthy that the **voluntary sector** shows slow but steady improvement in the quality of provision for children with special educational needs, particularly in the following key areas:-

- the development of links with the primary schools to which the children will transfer;
- better procedures in place for the early identification of children’s needs and evidence that staff are monitoring their early concerns;
- a stronger commitment to inclusion; and
- a significant improvement in the range and quality of resources available.

**Figure 3**



While in all sectors there remains a high level of commitment, among pre-school staff to meet the wide range of needs of young children, some significant issues remain within the voluntary/private sector. These issues include limited access to expertise, training and support, the variability in early years specialist (EYS) support and the lack of systematic recording of the children’s progress.

The evidence from the follow-up inspections demonstrates the need for still further development work in the following area:

- the quality and extent of initial training and continuous professional development (CPD) available to raise the awareness levels and expertise of the pre-school staff.

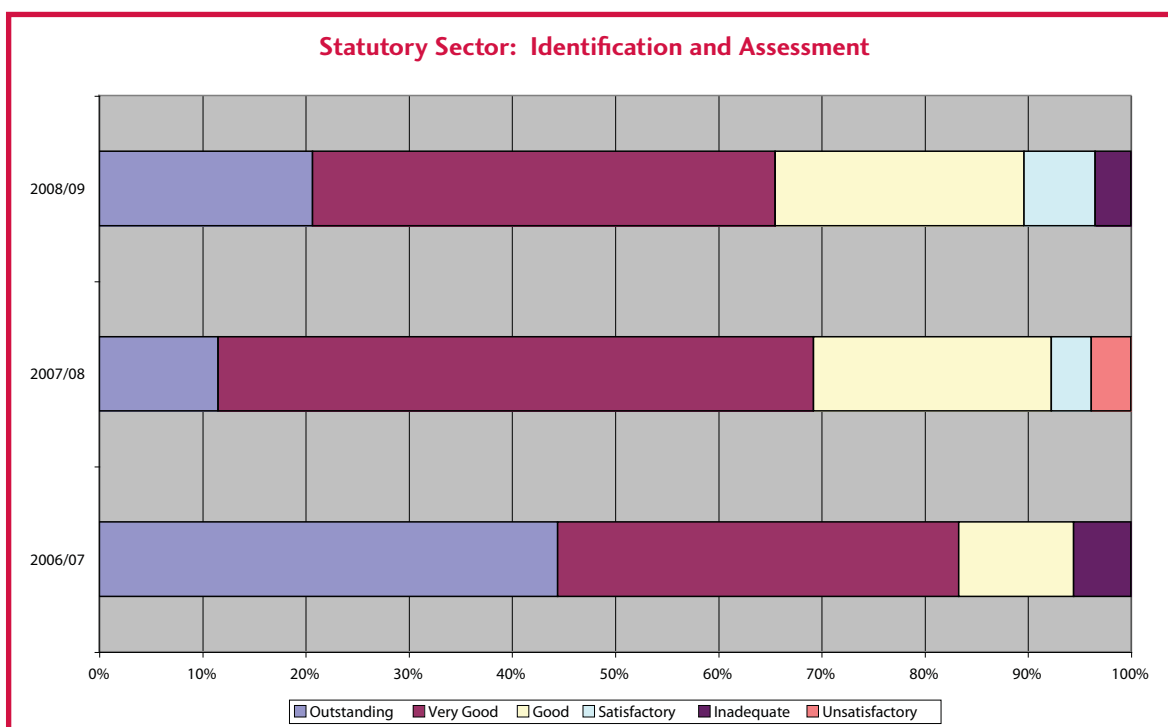
### Quality of Identification and Assessment

The early identification and assessment of special educational needs in the **statutory sector** was good or better in most (89%) of the centres inspected (Figure 4). A small number of centres, around 8% were satisfactory and 3% of them were inadequate. The main shortcomings noted by the inspectors continue to be in the areas of training and CPD in the identification of the increasing range of children's needs and in the provision of appropriate learning experiences. A similar issue was identified in the original survey inspection.

The strengths of the work identified in the statutory sector included:

- the quality of the training and the resultant expertise of the staff;
- the systematic and accurate tracking and recording of the children's progress;
- the quality of the EPs and the inclusion of well-focused targets and associated monitoring of progress; and
- the inclusive involvement of the parents at all relevant stages.

Figure 4



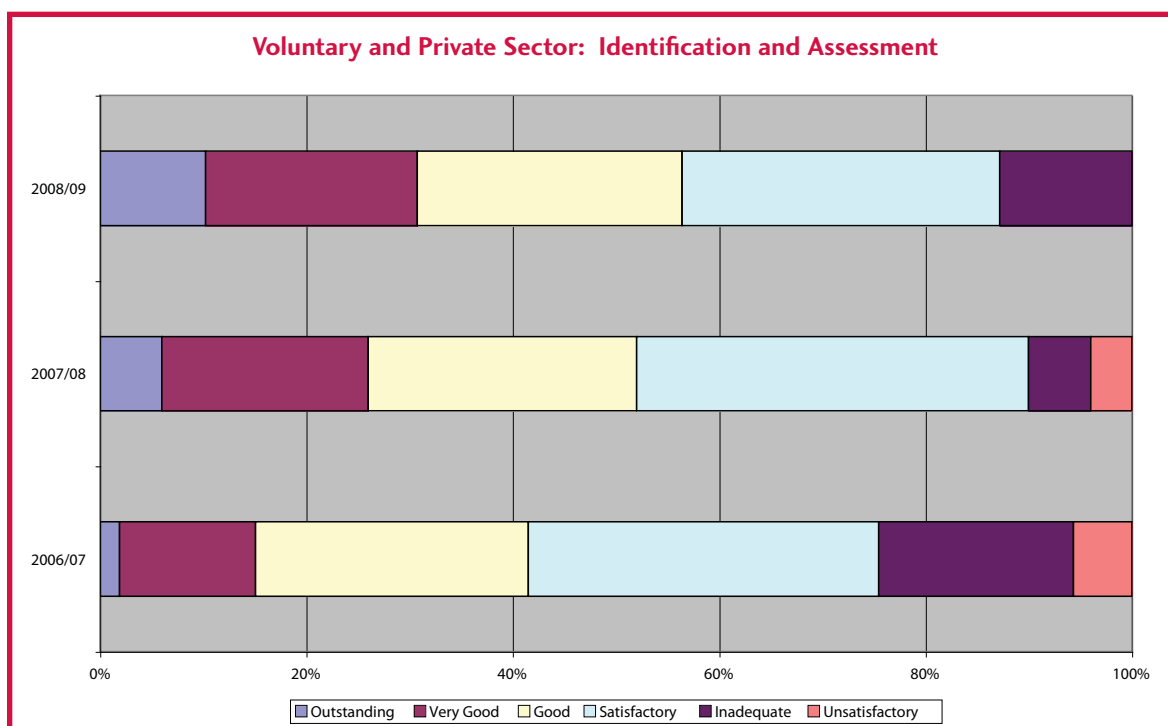
While much good work in supporting and addressing children’s needs is clearly evident, some further progress is still required, across the statutory sector, in the following areas:

- the overly long and drawn out referral process, particularly in relation to the completion of assessments and their associated reports and the subsequent delay in implementing early intervention strategies;
- the impact of the reduced health screening process, undertaken by health visitors, carried out prior to children starting pre-school; and
- the delays reported, by the principals of nursery schools, in children receiving prompt and adequate professional support once they are moved to Stage 3 on the SEN register.

The inspection data from 2006 onwards (Figure 5) shows evidence of improvement in the quality of identification and assessment of SEN in the **voluntary/private sector**. In 2008-09, for example, the quality of the early identification and assessment of special educational needs within the voluntary/private sector was good or better in a majority (57%) of centres

compared with 42% in 2006-07. A significant minority (39%) of the provision, while satisfactory, had important shortcomings and these centres require improved staff expertise, training and CPD and better access to expert diagnosis and support. A minority (13%) was inadequate. Although there is evidence of some improvements, progress remains slow and the provision still lags considerably behind that of the statutory sector.

Figure 5



It is clear that further progress is still required, particularly in the following areas:

- a clear pathway of advice and support for the identification, assessment and provision for children with special needs, from the earliest stages of a child's life and the sharing of this information;
- investment in the role of the health visitor to identify needs and to share appropriate information with those working in the pre-school centres;
- more systematic observation, and recording of the children's progress; and
- more focused and appropriate EPs for individual children.

## 5. Recurring Issues

- 5.1 This follow-up survey has confirmed that the ongoing areas identified for improvement in 2006 which included training and development, access to external specialist advice and assessment, including diagnosis, and joined-up working, still require further development.
- 5.2 There has been a slight improvement in the quality of the provision made for special educational needs but much remains to be done. Research findings<sup>1</sup> show that early intervention can in many cases prevent vulnerable children developing needs that require statutory assessment and extensive support at a later stage. Effective strategies for early intervention, involving pre-school staff and the range of health and education agencies, have yet to be realised in a consistent manner. There remains a continuing need for better training, resources, support and access to specialist services, including ELB's Educational Psychology services, if standards of provision are to rise.
- 5.3 It is noteworthy that the provision for special educational needs within the voluntary/private sector is improving, but the pace of improvement needs to quicken. The provision for SEN is not yet integrated with sufficient consistency in the day-to-day work of these centres. As a result, too many children do not receive prompt and appropriate support to address their individual needs in a timely and effective manner. A major recommendation in the original survey report was to improve the capacity of the staff within the voluntary/private sector but progress in this area has also been slow.
- 5.4 There have been some changes for the better within the ELBs in their attempt to address the key priorities identified in the original survey report through, for example, the introduction of collaborative training programmes. While this is a start, the developments in this area of work, since the original survey, have been overly slow and patchy. As a result children and their families are not able to receive the prompt attention and support which they need. Collaborative working relationships need to be developed further with the new Regional Board of the Department of Health, Social Service and Personal Safety (DHSSPS) and the local Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCT), to ensure consistency and equity of service and more effective early intervention for all young children who need support. It is disappointing to note that, out of the many multi-agency support teams funded through the Children and Young People Funding Package (CYPFP), the pre-school sector is included in just one ELB; this level of provision remains inadequate.

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<sup>1</sup> *Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland, A longitudinal Study funded by Department of Education, Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, and Social Steering Group, 1998-2004, Stranmillis Press.*

5.5 The findings of this follow-up inspection indicate that there has been insufficient action during the interim years to develop consistent collaborative working between Departments and the other statutory and voluntary agencies in the planning and delivery of appropriate support for pre-school children with special educational needs, the staff and the parents. It is hoped that DE's Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion and its 0-6 Early Years Strategy, will when implemented, bring coherence in terms of the policies and services affecting early years and thus ensure that children and parents receive the best possible services.

## **6. Recommendations - Key Priorities for Action**

6.1 Many of the key priorities for action which were identified during the original survey in 2006 remain to be addressed fully. These include:

- a clear commitment from DE to ensure that there is effective and consistent provision for all children with special educational needs in pre-school education and to give priority to raising the standards of special educational needs provision, particularly, but not exclusively, in the voluntary/private sector;
- the development by DE of a comprehensive policy, and funded strategy, to address the variations and inconsistencies in:
  - funding;
  - training; and
  - equity of access to specialist advice and support across the statutory and voluntary/private sectors;
- joint action from DE and DHSSPS leading to more effective inter-agency collaboration and strategic planning and improved accountability arrangements;
- a greater effort by all responsible agencies to work together to provide the necessary early intervention and high quality, consistent frontline services that will help children progress and flourish;

- a greater emphasis on the early identification of special educational needs aligned with the provision of appropriate, timely and effective intervention and support that helps young children make progress;
- the development and monitoring of consistent policies and strategies for the provision of support within pre-school education (this issue will pass from the ELBs to Education and Skills Authority (ESA));
- ensuring that the placement of children with special educational needs does not result in inappropriate pressure on individual nursery schools;
- continued collaboration among training providers on the content and nature of in-service training; and
- ongoing action by ETI to follow-up the issues identified by this follow-up report, including the sharing of inspection findings with those who have responsibilities for special educational needs provision in the pre-school sector.

## **7. Conclusion**

- 7.1 The evidence from this follow-up survey shows that progress has been made in addressing the key areas for improvement identified in 2006 particularly within the voluntary/private sector where the provision for children with special educational needs is slowly improving. Much, however, remains to be done. For children within pre-school education, getting appropriate diagnosis and support at an early stage still remains too much of a lottery.
- 7.2 As in 2006, there continues to be patchy provision for young children with special educational needs and major inconsistencies in what is available for them and their parents. The findings of this follow-up survey indicates that while there has been some progress in raising the quality of provision for special educational needs, there still remains too much variability, across the pre-school sector, in the availability of expertise, funding and resources and in the effectiveness of professional collaboration. The provision remains much stronger in the statutory sector; this reflects the variation in the levels of training, available expertise and support and funding across pre school settings.

- 7.3 The establishment of ESA should provide an opportunity for improved support for the pre-school sector and the creation of clear, consistent and appropriate structures and processes to address the variation in provision across Northern Ireland. There is also a high expectation in the sector that, through the implementation of the proposals emerging from DE's Review of Special Education Needs and Inclusion, and the launch of DE's 0-6 Strategy for Early Years, that many of the above issues will be addressed.
- 7.4 The Education and Training Inspectorate will continue to monitor and report on the progress in addressing the areas for improvement originally identified in the 2006 report the majority of which continue to be pertinent in 2009.





## APPENDIX A

### Summary of responses received from three Education and Library Boards, two childcare partnerships and the Early Years Organisation (EYO)

The original inspection report in 2006 identified a number of key recommendations for improvement, requiring action by the various Departments, the ELBs and the various voluntary and statutory agencies involved in the provision and support for young children with special needs. The recommendations focused on the need for increased training and development, access to external specialist advice and assessment, and joined-up working.

In May 2009, the five ELBs and the HSCTs were invited to complete a short proforma which sought written information on:

- the training and development opportunities for pre-school staff provided since the original inspection;
- any changes or developments regarding the pre-school centres' access to external advice or initiating referral procedures or assessment; and
- the extent of inter-agency working.

Two CPs and three ELBs responded. Two responses were also received from the EYO. The following section summarises the responses received from the ELBs, the HSCTs and the EYO in relation to these three areas; this summary broadly reflects the points and recurring issues discussed within the ETI report.

#### Training and Development

The respondents report that the following improvements have occurred:

- the additional training opportunities which have been provided for pre-school staff in dealing with autism Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), including strategies to support the children's communication skills; and
- the evolving understanding and skill by staff in recording significant observations and evidence about children's progress in important areas such as behaviour, understanding instructions, attention and listening, and social skills.

The areas identified by the respondents for continued improvement are:

- the provision of more training opportunities for the staff in the voluntary/private sector to help guide and support parents to become more involved in their child's education and development;
- CPD for staff, especially within the voluntary/private sector, to enhance their knowledge of generic special educational needs issues, to develop their skill in drafting appropriate educational plans for the children with additional needs and to provide more focused and effective support to meet these needs; and
- sustainable funding streams to underpin long-term strategic planning and development work in the provision for special educational needs.

### Access to External Specialist Advice and Assessment

The respondents report that the following improvements have occurred:

- more instances of pre-school centres availing of information or training from the Educational Psychology Services of the ELBs; and
- the developing use made of EPs with SMART<sup>2</sup> targets and action plans for these specific children.

The areas identified by the respondents for continued improvement are:

- the need for a single point of contact for advice and guidance regarding special educational needs matters for staff within the voluntary/private sector;
- the developing issues around the process for referral of pre-school children at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice, for professional diagnosis and assessment, when the child has received short-term support from speech therapists employed by SureStart or funded through the nursery school; and
- better access to professional assistance and expertise, within reasonable timeframes, for those children who have, or may have, delays or difficulties with aspects of their learning.

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<sup>2</sup> Define SMART – targets which are specific, measurable, agreed, realistic and time based.

## Joined-up Working

The respondents report that the following improvements have occurred:

- the enhanced role for special educational needs co-ordinators in primary schools, providing advice and guidance on children with special educational needs within the nursery unit;
- the developing links with SureStart staff and health experts, including access to relevant information, guidance and support from speech and language therapists;
- the improved links and the sharing of appropriate information between the centre staff and external agencies already involved with families prior to the child commencing pre-school;
- increased links between the statutory and the voluntary/private centres including shared visits and CPD;
- evidence of better links evolving between pre-school centres and the local feeder primary schools to ensure smoother transitions for children moving into year 1;
- improved access to additional nursery classroom assistants to enhance the children's speech and language;
- the increased focus by many pre-school centres on open communication and stronger partnerships with the parents, initiated at the settling-in process; and
- the better monitoring of children's progress and ongoing informal updates with the parents.

The areas identified by the respondents for continued improvement are:

- better communication, the sharing of information and closer working relationships between the support agencies, such as health visitors and social workers and the staff in pre-school centres; and
- the sharing by parents of children with special educational needs of important information relating to their child's development, with the pre-school staff along with any assessment reports.



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