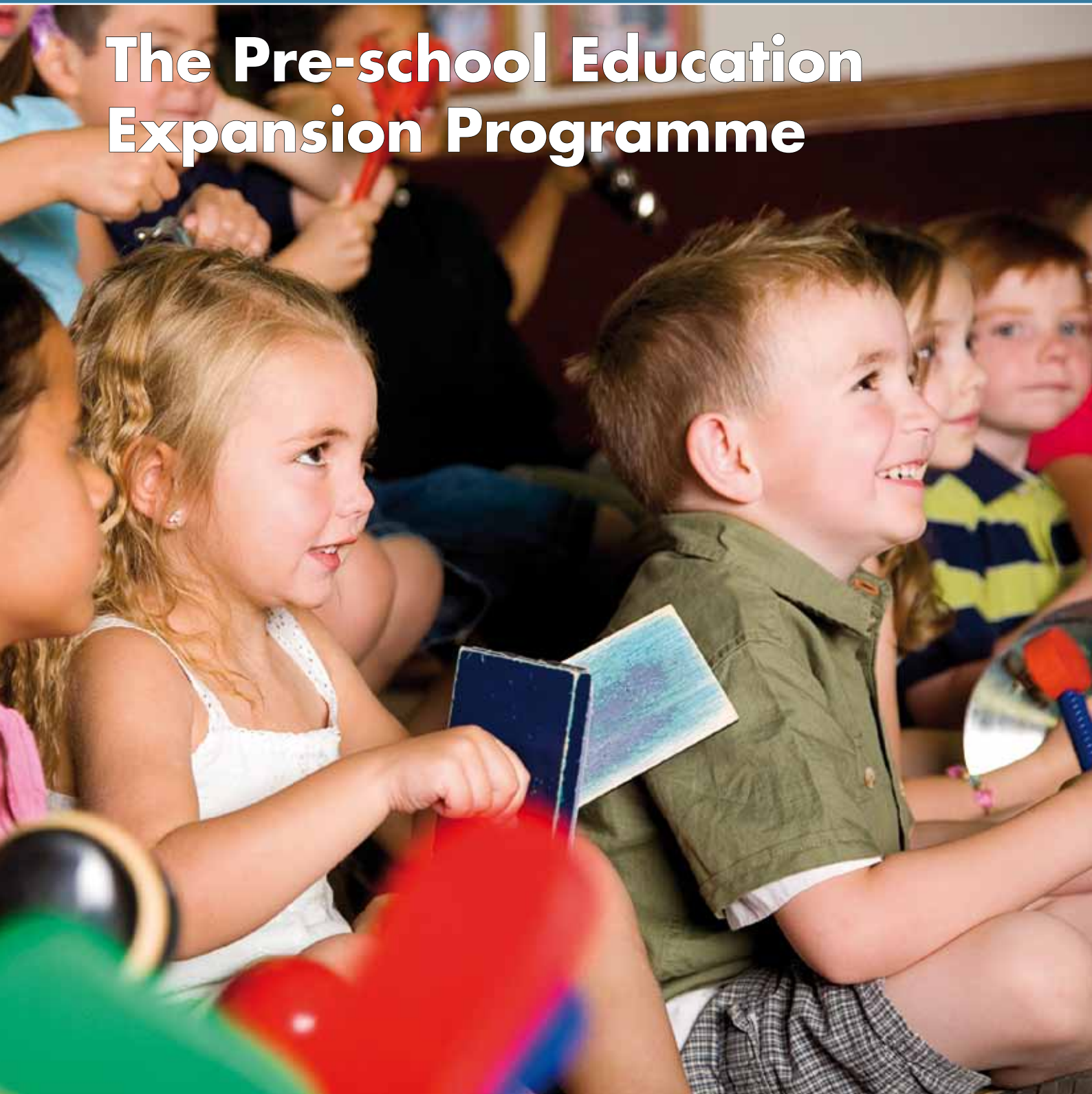




Northern Ireland Audit Office

# The Pre-school Education Expansion Programme



REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL  
NIA 133/08-09 19 June 2009





Northern Ireland Audit Office

Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland

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# The Pre-school Education Expansion Programme



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*J M Dowdall CB*  
Comptroller and Auditor General

Northern Ireland Audit Office  
19 June 2009

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## Abbreviations

AWPUs	Age Weighted Pupil Units
Board	Education and Library Board
CCMS	Council for Catholic Maintained Schools
DENI	Department of Education for Northern Ireland
Department	Department of Education (DE)
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment (now known as the Department for Children, Schools and Families)
DHSS	Department of Health and Social Services
DHSSPS	Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety
EPPNI	Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland
ETI	Education and Training Inspectorate
EU	European Union
IDGEY	Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years
KS1	Key Stage 1
LMS	Local Management of Schools
NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NIPPA	Northern Ireland Pre-school Playgroup Association
NISRA	Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFMDfM	Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister
PEAG	Pre-school Education Advisory Group
the Programme	The Pre-school Education Expansion Programme
SEN	Special Educational Needs
T&EA	Training and Employment Agency
TSN	Targeting Social Need
UK	United Kingdom

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## Glossary

### **Compulsory School Starting Date**

In Northern Ireland the compulsory school starting date is the September following a child's fourth birthday, if this date falls on or before 1 July.

### **Early Years Specialists**

An alternative to qualified teachers; these specialists provide support and advice to the staff of funded voluntary/private pre-school centres. They must hold an appropriate qualification and have at least two years experience in a leadership role in a pre-school centre.

### **Key Stage 1**

In Northern Ireland, the twelve years of compulsory education are divided into Key Stages for assessment, testing and reporting purposes. Key Stage 1 covers:

Primary 3 (ages 6-7)

Primary 4 (ages 7-8)

### **Longitudinal Study**

A research study designed to collect data at different points in time, over a certain period, for the same participants.

### **Nursery Schools and Classes**

Statutory settings providing either full-time or part-time education for children who have attained the age of two years but are under compulsory school age. A nursery school is a stand alone school which is managed by its own Board of Governors. A nursery class is a unit with one or more classes attached to a primary school.

### **Programme for Government**

The Programme for Government sets out the Executive's strategic priorities and key plans for the years ahead. It includes a Public Service Agreement Framework detailing the actions and

targets departments will take in support of the Executive's priorities. The current Programme for Government covers the period 2008-2011.

### **Private Pre-school Providers**

Independent businesses providing care, play and educational opportunities for children between three years of age and compulsory school age, on a fee paying basis. They must be registered with the appropriate Health and Social Services Trust.

### **Reception Places**

Provision in a primary school for children who have reached their fourth birthday but who are below compulsory school age. Reception pupils are usually taught in composite classes with Primary 1 children.

### **Voluntary Playgroups**

Pre-school settings which are run on a not-for-profit basis. They offer care and educational opportunities through play during morning or afternoon sessions for children usually between three years of age and compulsory school age. Voluntary playgroups must be registered with the appropriate Health and Social Services Trust.

## Executive Summary



## Executive Summary

### Introduction

1. Early childhood is a crucial period for human development and can shape the remainder of people's lives. It is, therefore, a time when children need high quality educational experiences. High quality pre-school education, in turn, depends on the Department of Education (the Department) designing and implementing a cost effective policy which achieves sustainable outcomes.

### Development and Implementation of the Programme

2. The 1998 policy document, *Investing in Early Learning*, outlined details of the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme (the Programme), the initiative by which the Government's commitment to expand funded pre-school education would be achieved in Northern Ireland. It also set the Programme in the context of the wider Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, *Children First*, which was being developed at that time (paragraph 1.2). We found that, in developing its policy for the introduction of the Programme, the Department had adhered closely to best practice guidance on policy-making which was subsequently produced by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in July 2003 (paragraph 1.9). This report is, therefore, a review of good practice with a view to encouraging read across to the development and implementation of policies in other programmes.
3. In order to identify what the Programme was intended to achieve, the Department required development plans for its implementation to be drawn up by Pre-school Education Advisory Groups (PEAGs) which were established in each Education and Library Board (Board). The Programme aimed to secure an additional 9,000 pre-school places (6,000 – 7,000 in the medium term), targeted in the first instance on children from disadvantaged circumstances, with the longer term aim of providing a full year of pre-school education for every child whose parents want it. There was a broad intention for the additional places to be divided in roughly equal numbers between the statutory and voluntary/private sectors, and providers would have to adhere to quality standards assessed by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) (paragraphs 2.3 – 2.6).
4. *Children First* envisaged an integrated approach to early childhood education and care. This approach operated at a number of levels in the implementation of the Programme. In the first place, the Programme contributed to the Targeting Social Need (TSN) agenda. In addition, an Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years (IDGEY), originally set up in 1995 and consisting of the Department, the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) and the Training and Employment Agency (T&EA), acted as the oversight body for the implementation of *Children First* as a whole (paragraphs 2.7 – 2.9). More recently, the transfer of the Early Years policy lead to the Department in November 2006 signalled Government's intention to further integrate policy and

service delivery for early years services, including the provision of pre-school education. One current outworking of this move is the development of a 0-6 Early Years Strategy (paragraph 2.10).

5. In developing the Programme, the Department adopted a rigorous approach that gathered, critically appraised and used high quality evidence from a number of sources (for example, ETI) to inform the policy-making process. To ensure that the Programme was responsive to the needs of all the stakeholders concerned, the Department also carried out a consultation process aimed at generating views, ideas and information which would inform its policy decision making (paragraphs 2.11 – 2.14).
6. The Programme was developed and implemented in an effective manner and lessons were learned and, through on-going consultation, were acted upon. The Department recognised, however, that there were two areas of potential improvement related to the earliest phase. Given its non-compulsory nature and the reliance on parental choice for uptake, the participation of parents might have been encouraged through more targeted consultation at the design stage of the Programme's development (for example, by the use of focus groups). It is important to take account of how policy will be perceived by its end users (paragraph 2.15).
7. A related area for improvement concerns communication with potential recipients. The focus group set up by the Department

to examine the new admissions arrangements reported that *"the absence of a co-ordinated publicity campaign was a significant factor in the confusion and misunderstanding of the 1999 admissions arrangements."* The Department took on board the need for better publicity and improved the position considerably through the development of a publicity strategy and by consulting widely with stakeholders (including parents) as the Programme was implemented (paragraphs 2.19-2.22).

8. The Department's policy on pre-school expansion is based on an understanding that children benefit from quality early education. In communicating the message that such provision is good for children, the Department has recognised that it needed to connect more effectively with parents, at the outset, and convey how its proposals would support parents and strengthen families. In particular, the Department could have taken more care in explaining how the Programme would be incremental in its approach, focusing first on disadvantaged families, before being rolled out more generally. In its strategic planning, the Department now recognises the value of having a well developed communication strategy to explain more fully all aspects of educational policy (paragraph 2.23).

### Accessibility and Quality of Pre-school Education

9. Accessible, high quality pre-school education is essential to enable children to fulfil their academic potential and to help them develop their social skills and attitudes

## Executive Summary

which will stand them in good stead in later life. Our review found that the Programme has supported a substantial increase in the number of available pre-school places. By 2002-03, the final year of the expansion phase, a net total of over 9,900 new funded places had been created, which increased provision to cover approximately 91 per cent of children in their immediate pre-school year. In line with the Programme's objectives, the number of pre-school children educated in a reception setting had also been reduced by around 50 per cent (paragraph 3.6). Since the expansion would be incremental, priority in admission was given to children of socially disadvantaged parents. Research indicates that such children benefit more than others from pre-school education. Priority was also given to older children (those with July or August birthdays).

10. While we acknowledge these achievements by the Department, there were some anomalies. For instance, whilst the Department has been increasingly successful in matching the provision of places with demand, there are still some areas with either an excess or shortfall in provision. The Department has stated that demand cannot be matched to supply with geographical exactness because of the number of factors involved, including the non-compulsory nature of pre-school education and the constantly changing demography (paragraph 3.8).
11. In addition, a number of children who were not in their immediate pre-school year received a place in the Programme; in 2004, the Department calculated that this

involved resources of around £2 million per annum. In the Department's view the legislation permitted such children to take up places and, provided all pre-school year children were accepted first, their admission could not be prevented. The only alternative, if two year olds were excluded from the Programme, may have been to close provision thus denying access to some children in their pre-school year. The Department told us that in developing the 0-6 Early Years Strategy, its thinking has moved on. In future it is likely, resources permitting, that provision for two year olds will be a targeted service aimed at the most disadvantaged children (paragraphs 3.9 – 3.14).

12. Evidence on the quality and effectiveness of the Programme and pre-school education in general is available from a number of sources. In the first place, inspection by ETI indicates that only a minimal percentage of pre-school settings fail to achieve a good/satisfactory grading in terms of ethos, management and education. However, whilst the latest Chief Inspector's Report shows that, during the period 2006-2008, over 90 per cent of the provision inspected had been graded at satisfactory or better, there has been a downward movement in the grades awarded in both the statutory and voluntary/private sectors. The Department needs to investigate and address the reasons for this decline in effectiveness in both sectors to ensure that pre-school children receive the best quality education (paragraphs 3.15 – 3.19).
13. A longitudinal study of the effects of pre-school education – Effective Pre-school

Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI)

– provides evidence that high quality pre-school education makes a difference to the cognitive and social/behavioural development of children. EPPNI also draws attention to the particular value of pre-school education to children at risk of developing learning or behavioural difficulties. The Department recognises that the issue is important and we would encourage it to take the necessary steps to support and develop sustainable provision which meets these needs (paragraphs 3.20 – 3.25).

14. A review of the Programme in 2004 has resulted in remedial action being taken to resolve some structural and operational issues. The review also identified a range of other issues which remain to be addressed by the Department: focusing resources on the professional development of the workforce; involving voluntary/private providers as equal partners; and improving the integration of children with special educational needs (paragraphs 3.26 – 3.39). The Department told us that, following on from the transfer of responsibility for certain services from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) on 1 November 2006, it could not commit to a timetable for taking forward these other issues until the strategy for early years services is agreed (paragraph 2.10).
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## Part One: Introduction and Background



## Part One: Introduction and Background

### Why action was needed in Northern Ireland

- 1.1 In 1997, Northern Ireland had the lowest nursery provision and under-five participation in education in the UK, notwithstanding its younger compulsory school age. Although the Department funded nursery schools and nursery units attached to statutory primary schools before 1997, the non-compulsory nature of pre-school education meant that, prior to the Programme, any expansion of nursery education provision had been limited. Additional places were being funded by skewing resources from other statutory services or by availing of short-term grants under inner city initiatives or from European Union (EU) Programmes.

element in the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, *Children First*<sup>1</sup> which set out a range of measures being taken by the Government to “ensure that high quality, affordable childcare for children up to the age of 14 is available in every community in Northern Ireland”. *Children First*’s long-term aim was to integrate early education and childcare.

- 1.3 The Programme was targeted initially on the most socially disadvantaged children<sup>2</sup>, who are most likely to experience difficulty at school and who are known to benefit to a greater degree from pre-school education, as well as the oldest children in the pre-school cohort. The original target was to create over 9,000 new high quality funded places by 2002. In the longer term, the aim was to provide a full year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it.

### The Pre-school Education Expansion Programme was launched in 1998

- 1.2 The Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (the Programme) was launched in April 1998 with the publication of the policy document, *Investing in Early Learning*. The Programme arose from a government commitment made in 1997 as part of a National Childcare Strategy, to provide high quality pre-school education for every four year old whose parents wished to avail of it. *Investing in Early Learning* set out how this commitment would be translated, as a joint initiative by the Department of Education (the Department) and the then Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS), to suit Northern Ireland’s particular needs. In 1999, the Programme became a key

- 1.4 In practical terms, the Programme has provided new funded places through a capital building programme for the statutory sector and a recurrent funding package for both the statutory and voluntary/private sectors. Since 1998, the total capital and recurrent expenditure incurred by the Programme has been £13 million and £72 million respectively (see **Figure 1**).
- 1.5 Recurrent funding to voluntary/private sector providers is made on the basis of a flat rate funding allocation based on the number of part time places filled. This allocation started at £1,100 per child in 1998-99 and was based on the value of the voucher provided under the scheme

1 The Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, *Children First*, DHSS, DENI and T&EA, 1999

2 Socially Disadvantaged Children are defined as children with one or both parents in receipt of Income-based Jobseekers Allowance or Income Support, *Investing in Early Learning*, 1998, paragraph 4.18

**Figure 1: Programme Expenditure from 1998-99 to 2007-08**

Year	Capital Expenditure £'000	Recurrent Expenditure £'000
1998-99	100	1,644
1999-00	415	4,202
2000-01	4,478	7,133
2001-02	2,136	8,272
2002-03	3,563	8,730
2003-04	1,857	7,919
2004-05	420	7,937
2005-06	-	8,038
2006-07	-	8,628
2007-08	-	9,240
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,969</b>	<b>71,743</b>

Note: Capital funding was provided largely to the statutory sector. In addition to the above, under a voluntary playgroups initiative, grants totalling £750,000 were provided over the three years 2004-05 to 2006-07 (£250,000 each year) for small capital projects.

Source: Department of Education

previously operating in England. This figure was regarded as sufficient to cover the cost of a part time place. The rate has increased to £1,445 for 2008-09. It is this allocation which accounts for the bulk of the £72 million shown in Figure 1.

- 1.6 Recurrent funding to statutory providers is made through the Local Management of Schools (LMS) Common Funding Scheme and is therefore accounted for as part of

**Figure 2: AWPUs for pupils in statutory settings for 2008-09**

Type of Setting	AWPU funding allocation per pupil £
Nursery Class - Part Time	1,760
Nursery Class - Full Time	2,654
Nursery School - Part Time	1,878
Nursery School - Full Time	2,855

Source: Department of Education

schools overall budgets. The majority of this funding (over 80 per cent) is distributed to schools using Age Weighted Pupil Units (AWPUs), which is a method for assigning a value to each pupil. Additional financial support can be provided to schools, under the LMS funding formula, to target specific elements such as TSN, depending on their individual circumstances. The AWPUs for full time and part time nursery pupils for the 2008-09 school year are shown at **Figure 2.**

### **As a result of the Programme there has been a significant increase in the number of children receiving funded pre-school education**

- 1.7 Prior to 1998, funded pre-school education in Northern Ireland was provided solely by the statutory sector in nursery schools and nursery classes within primary schools. In addition, reception places were available at a number of primary schools to children in their immediate pre-school year who had

## Part One: Introduction and Background

**Figure 3: Changes in the level of funded pre-school places at 2002 and 2008**

Pre-school Setting	Places at October 1997	Places at October 2002	Change from 1997 to 2002	Places at October 2008	Change from 1997 to 2008
Nursery schools and classes	8,541	14,092	+5,551	14,080	+5,539
Voluntary/Private	0	5,804	+5,804	6,603	+6,603
Reception classes	2,575	1,180	-1,395	606	-1,969
<b>Totals</b>	<b>11,116</b>	<b>21,076</b>	<b>+9,960</b>	<b>21,289</b>	<b>+10,173</b>

Source: Department of Education

reached their fourth birthday. At that time no funded places were available in the voluntary/private sector. **Figure 3** shows the change in the level of funded pre-school places since the introduction of the Programme; at the end of the expansion phase (2002); and in 2008.

followed the 1999 Cabinet Office report “Professional Policy-Making in the Twenty First Century” and set out ten features of good policy-making, which are summarised at **Figure 4**.

### Scope of the NIAO Examination

- 1.8 Departmental investment in early years provision through the Programme has been significant and has consequences for the development of future generations of citizens. In view of this, and because the Programme is generally regarded as a strong example of good practice in policy-making, we examined the process through which the Programme was developed and implemented.
- 1.9 *A Practical Guide to Policy Making* was published in July 2003 by OFMDFM as part of a range of measures to improve policy development in the Northern Ireland Civil Service. The guide closely

- 1.10 Although this best practice guidance produced by OFMDFM (referred to throughout our Report as “current guidance”) was not available to the Department when it was developing the Programme, the broad principles of good practice were recognised, and in Part 2 we assess the policy-making procedures within the framework of the guidance. In Part 3 we examine what progress the Programme has made against its core objectives of improving the accessibility of pre-school education and maintaining its quality.

**Figure 4: The ten features of good policy-making**

- **Forward Looking** - clearly defines the outcomes the policy is designed to achieve and where appropriate takes a long-term view of its impact
- **Outward Looking** - takes account of how other countries/regions have dealt with the issue
- **Innovative, Flexible and Creative** - questions established ways of doing things and encourages new ideas; open to the comments and suggestions of others
- **Evidence-based** - uses the best available evidence from a wide range of sources and involves key stakeholders at an early stage and throughout the policy's development
- **Inclusive** - takes account of the impact on the needs of all those directly or indirectly affected by the policy
- **Joined Up** - takes a holistic view: considers overarching policy issues and wider government priorities
- **Learns Lessons** - learns from experience of what works and what does not
- **Communication** - considers how the policy will be communicated with the public
- **Evaluation** - builds systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of the policy into the policy making process
- **Review** - keeps established policy under review to ensure it continues to deal with the problem it was designed to solve, taking account of associated benefits elsewhere

*Source: A Practical Guide to Policy Making, OFMDFM, July 2003*



## Part Two: Development and Implementation of the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme





## Part Two: Development and Implementation of the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme

### Introduction

- 2.1 This section of the report assesses the policy-making procedures of the Department in relation to the development and implementation of the Programme against the best practice guidance which was subsequently produced by OFMDFM (paragraph 1.9).

### Looking outward to the position in England provided the Department with a flavour of the type of arrangements it may need to adopt

- 2.2 The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE)<sup>3</sup> had already started work on the expansion of pre-school provision in England, using the Government's strategic principles for early years services as its basis<sup>4</sup>. These principles highlighted the importance of having good quality provision which was planned at a local level and secured in collaboration with the voluntary and private sectors. Having decided to proceed with the expansion of pre-school education provision in Northern Ireland, the Department needed to design a programme which would deliver both the Government's manifesto commitment and accommodate Northern Ireland's specific structural and educational arrangements<sup>5</sup>. Its policy document *Investing in Early Learning* (paragraph 1.2) therefore adapted the principles to suit the particular needs of Northern Ireland.

### Having taken what it could from DfEE, the Department then took forward its own arrangements

- 2.3 A Pre-school Education Advisory Group (PEAG) was established in each Board area. Its role was to prepare, for the Department's approval, an annual Development Plan identifying the need for additional pre-school provision across its area and how this would be met through both the statutory and voluntary/private sectors. PEAGs are inter-agency groups which contain representatives of all relevant local interests – the Boards, Health Boards and Trusts, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS), the voluntary/private sector, integrated and Irish-medium education.
- 2.4 In the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review the Department submitted bids to the Department of Finance and Personnel for recurrent and capital provision in respect of the Programme. This resulted in the provision of recurrent funding for an additional 7,000 pre-school places over three years (together with associated capital), to bring coverage up from 45 per cent to 85 per cent of the pre-school cohort by 2001-02. Where resources would permit, it was also the intention to replace reception provision with suitable alternative pre-school provision.
- 2.5 The Departmental target of 85 per cent coverage of children in their immediate pre-school year was subsequently expanded in the Programme for Government to a year's funded pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it, the long-term aim

3 Now known as the Department for Children, Schools and Families

4 Strategic Principles for Early Years Services, DfEE, Nursery Education Vouchers and Early Education, 1997-98

5 In Northern Ireland the compulsory school starting date is the September following the child's fourth birthday (if the child is four before 1 July) rather than the school term following their fifth birthday as in Great Britain. In addition, the schooling system in Northern Ireland has the following distinct management types: Controlled; Voluntary Maintained; Voluntary Grammar Schools; Grant Maintained Integrated; Controlled Integrated and Other Maintained (Irish Medium)



set out in *Investing in Early Learning*. To determine the possible extent of demand, the Department included questions in the Universal Household Survey<sup>6</sup> undertaken by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). From the data received it was estimated that no more than 90 per cent of parents would seek a funded place for their child in its immediate pre-school year and this effectively became the target for coverage. This would mean approximately 9,000 children, and evidence of take-up has proved this to be largely correct.

- 2.6 There was a broad intention for the additional places to be divided in roughly equal numbers between statutory and voluntary/private providers. In order to ensure that the additional places provided good quality education, all providers had to meet minimum quality standards and be open to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). **Appendix 1** details the main conditions attached to both statutory and voluntary/private providers who joined the Programme.

### **The Programme's intended outcomes 'joined up' with the Government's wider priority of TSN and the emerging Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy**

- 2.7 Policy-makers are required to adopt a joined up approach to policy-making by taking a holistic view of how overarching policy issues and existing government priorities may be taken into account in their planning. This view is endorsed by the Organisation

for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report *Starting Strong* (2001) which calls for "a strong and equal partnership between health and education systems to support a lifelong learning approach from birth, to encourage smooth transitions for children and recognises early childhood education and care as an important part of the education process".

### **The Programme contributed to the aims of TSN by targeting the additional pre-school places at socially disadvantaged children**

- 2.8 The Government's TSN agenda aimed to tackle social need and social exclusion in Northern Ireland by targeting efforts and available resources on people, groups and areas in the greatest need. One objective of the Department's TSN strategy was to increase the participation rate of pre-school children from disadvantaged backgrounds in early years settings. The Programme contributed to this by targeting the additional pre-school places at socially disadvantaged children. In the first stages of the Programme, funding was allocated in proportion to each Board's share of this target group – when the needs of this group were met, the needs of the remaining children in the pre-school cohort would be addressed.

### **The Programme also dovetailed with the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy Children First**

- 2.9 The Programme became part of the emerging Northern Ireland Childcare

<sup>6</sup> The Universal Household Survey, also known as the Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey, is carried out by NISRA on a regular basis and is designed to provide a snapshot of the lifestyle and views of the people of Northern Ireland.

## Part Two: Development and Implementation of the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme

Strategy, *Children First*, which was being progressed by an Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years (IDGEY)<sup>7</sup>. IDGEY's membership reflected the shared responsibility for childcare policy in Northern Ireland at the time and provided the Department with an ideal forum for joined-up working. Through IDGEY, Programme requirements such as qualifications for voluntary/private centre staff and early years specialists (paragraph 2.17) were agreed; common service standards for voluntary/private centres were established; and a sub-group to examine the integration of regulation and inspection of care was set up.

### **The Programme will be further developed within the forthcoming 0-6 Early Years Strategy**

- 2.10 The Early Years policy lead transferred from DHSSPS to the Department in November 2006. This signalled Government's intention to further integrate policy and service delivery for early years services, including the provision of pre-school education. The Department's recent focus has been on the development of a 0-6 Early Years Strategy, broken down into key deliverables to be undertaken by four thematic groups – good practice; equality; delivery arrangements and workforce strategy. This Strategy will join up with other current government priorities such as OFMDFM's ten year children's reforms and the anti-poverty strategy which has superseded TSN.

### **The Department gathered evidence to support its policy decisions from a range of sources and involved key stakeholders at an early stage**

- 2.11 In developing policy, current best practice advocates that policy-makers use the “best available evidence from a wide range of sources” and involve key stakeholders “at an early stage and throughout a policy's development”<sup>8</sup>. As the need for, and benefits of, pre-school education had already been accepted by the Department, other sources of evidence were confined to fine tuning the day-to-day mechanics of the Programme. These focused on:

- using expert advice (e.g. ETI) to advise the Department on quality standards and inspection requirements;
- developing work previously carried out for a pre-school voucher scheme regarding quality assurance requirements; and
- sourcing information held at departmental level, including baseline statistics on existing levels of provision and population projections.

In addition, a mapping exercise<sup>9</sup> commissioned by IDGEY provided the Department with evidence of the appropriate qualifications which would be needed by early years workers.

- 2.12 A series of preliminary discussions held with representatives from DHSS; the Boards; Area Early Years Committees (now known as Childcare Partnerships); CCMS;

<sup>7</sup> IDGEY was originally set up in 1995, as a forum for interdepartmental consultation on a range of issues that affect young children. Membership of the Group comprised the Department, DHSS and T&EA

<sup>8</sup> A Practical Guide to Policy Making, OFMDFM July 2003, Figure 2.1

<sup>9</sup> Training and Qualifications for Staff in Pre-school Education Centres, IDGEY 1998

and the Northern Ireland Pre-school Playgroup Association (NIPPA) (now known as the Early Years organisation) identified key issues and secured the involvement of these main stakeholders in the Programme's preparatory stages. IDGEY was used throughout by the Department as a forum for sharing proposals, allowing members the opportunity to comment on, or challenge, drafts and ensured that the Programme's proposals were in keeping with the *Children First* strategy.

### The Department adopted an inclusive approach and consulted with a wide range of stakeholders and interested parties

2.13 Guidance recommends that the consultation process should improve decision-making by ensuring that policy decisions are “soundly

*based on evidence, that they take account of the views and experience of those affected by them”, and that the proposed arrangements are “workable”<sup>10</sup>. Current guidance also suggests that an inclusive approach to policy-making “consults those responsible for service delivery/ implementation and those at the receiving end or otherwise affected by the policy”<sup>11</sup>.*

2.14 The policy document, *Investing in Early Learning*, was drawn up following consultation with a wide range of groups and individuals with an interest in pre-school education. This was a two-stage process which looked at the structures needed to deliver the planned expansion and the mechanics of the Programme itself. **Figure 5** shows that the Department faced considerable time constraints in achieving the target launch date of September 1998.

**Figure 5: Timetable for the consultation process**

July – September 1997	Preliminary consultation with key stakeholders
5 September 1997	Draft consultation paper on the constitution of PEAGs issued to liaison group for comment
26 September 1997	Consultation paper on the constitution of PEAGs issued to early years interests for comment by 31 October 1997 (5 weeks to respond)
12 December 1997	Guidance issued on the constitution of PEAGs
17 December 1997	Pre-school Education – a consultative document issued for comment by 6 February 1998 (7 weeks to respond)
April 1998	<i>Investing in Early Learning</i> published

Source: Department of Education

10 Guide to Consultation Methods for Northern Ireland Public Authorities, OFMDFM 2003

11 A Practical Guide to Policy Making, OFMDFM July 2003, Figure 2.1

## Part Two: Development and Implementation of the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme

### The Department's consultation process should have involved parents directly

2.15 Consultation with *"those at the receiving end"* helps policy-makers to assess how a proposed policy/programme may be used by its intended recipients. This is particularly relevant when a policy's 'success' relies on its voluntary uptake by certain individuals or organisations. The Department told us that it consulted widely with parents at Board level following the publication of *Investing in Early Learning* and that these consultations have continued to be extensive. However, given the Programme's non-compulsory nature and the reliance on parental choice for uptake, we consider that the participation of parents might have been encouraged through more targeted consultation at the design stage of the Programme's development (for example, by the use of focus groups).

### The Department showed flexibility in developing the Programme following consultation with key stakeholders

2.16 It is important that written consultation documents are published *"when policy development is reasonably well advanced and (you) have reasonably firm proposals or a range of worked up options on which to consult"*<sup>12</sup>. In reaching this point, good policy-making shows a degree of flexibility by being open to comments and suggestions from others and by questioning the established way of doing things.

2.17 The proposal to involve a qualified teacher in all settings under the Programme was seen by the Department as a means of raising standards in educational provision and was an important factor in the presentation of the Programme as investment in quality. Following representations from key stakeholders representing voluntary sector interests (DHSS and NIPPA) concerning the sufficiency of existing expertise in the field, the Department showed flexibility by including early years specialists as an alternative option to a qualified teacher in delivering the quality assurance required under the Programme.

2.18 The Department told us that it has, in conjunction with ETI, worked closely with these specialists to ensure that the quality of their work with staff remains high and meets the needs of individual centres. However, we note, that the ETI report covering the period 2006-2008, found that *"the quality of external support provided by early years specialists to voluntary/private centres is varied"*. ETI reported that in a significant minority (defined as between 30 and 49 per cent) of the centres inspected in this period, the contribution of the early years specialists is a strength, but in just under one-quarter, their support is not as effective as it needs to be.

12 A Practical Guide to Policy Making, OFMDFM July 2003, paragraph 8.4

**A focus group set up by the Department found that the absence of a clear communications strategy contributed to the confusion and misunderstanding amongst some parents regarding admission arrangements**

2.19 In order to facilitate a clearer understanding, current guidance recommends that the communication of government policy should be:

- *“an integral part of policy development” and “be planned from the start of the policy process and tackled as an issue throughout”; and*
- *focused on what is likely to be of greatest public interest, highlighting the policy proposal and resulting likely criticisms.”<sup>13</sup>*

2.20 *Investing in Early Learning* was launched by the Department in April 1998. Press releases issued by the Department set out the main features of the Programme, including the need to target the initial places *“on the children who stand to benefit most”* and the positive fact that *“these extra places would mean almost 60% of children (now) benefiting from a pre-school place”*. By early 1999, steps had been taken by the Department towards developing a publicity strategy for the Programme and the introduction of new admission criteria for nursery schools and classes which gave priority to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds.

2.21 However, the new admission arrangements started to attract a significant amount of

public criticism from both parents and school authorities. To raise awareness of the Programme and counteract the adverse publicity, the Department developed and distributed a publicity leaflet specifically aimed at parents; as well as meeting with representative groups and publishing articles in the press.

2.22 The Department also commissioned a focus group<sup>14</sup> to review the operation of the new admissions arrangements. The focus group reported in 2000 that *“in spite of considerable effort by boards and schools to encourage parents to apply for places, it would accept that media publicity had had an adverse effect on what was otherwise a good news story”*. The group felt that *“the absence of a co-ordinated publicity campaign was a significant factor in the confusion and misunderstanding of the 1999 admission arrangements”*. Amongst other points, it recommended the introduction of *“better and timelier information about admission procedures for parents alongside better publicity on the admission arrangements for September 2000”*. The Department took this on board and revised the admission arrangements for 2000-01 to reflect the recommendations of the focus group.

2.23 The Department’s policy on pre-school expansion is based on an understanding that children benefit from quality early education. In communicating the message that such provision is good for children, the Department needed to connect more effectively at the outset with parents and convey how its proposals would support parents and strengthen families.

<sup>13</sup> A Practical Guide to Policy Making, OFMDFM July 2003 , paragraph 6.13

<sup>14</sup> Review of Open Enrolment Arrangements in the Nursery Sector, Report of Focus Group, 2000

## Part Two: Development and Implementation of the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme

In particular, the Department could have taken more care in explaining how the Programme would be incremental in its approach, focusing first on disadvantaged families, before being rolled out more generally. In its strategic planning<sup>15</sup>, the Department now recognises the value of having a well developed communication strategy to explain more fully all aspects of educational policy.

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15 Department of Education Business Plan, 2006-2008



## Part Three: Accessibility and Quality of Pre-school Education



## Part Three:

### Accessibility and Quality of Pre-school Education

#### Introduction

- 3.1 The key objectives of the Programme were to expand the number of funded pre-school places and to ensure that these additional places provided good quality pre-school education. In this Part we examine the progress made towards achieving these core objectives of improving the accessibility of pre-school education and maintaining good quality provision.

#### Progress in expanding accessibility has been achieved in a variety of ways

- 3.2 In terms of accessibility, the long-term aim of the Programme was to provide a year of pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it. Initially this objective was to be pursued through the targeting of children from disadvantaged backgrounds (paragraph 2.8). To facilitate this approach the Department introduced admissions criteria during the 1999-2000 school year which gave priority to socially disadvantaged children seeking pre-school places with either statutory or voluntary/private providers under the Programme.
- 3.3 We found that progress in meeting the objective of expanding the accessibility of pre-school education has been achieved in a variety of ways. For instance, progress towards creating the additional places was promoted and monitored at Board level by the PEAGs in their Annual Development Plans, and by the Department through its overall approval of these plans and annual allocation of places to the Boards. In addition, the Department utilised the

Universal Household Survey (paragraph 2.5) as a means of assessing the likely take-up rate. Evidence from the July 2002 survey indicated that parental demand for funded places was unlikely to exceed 90 per cent.

#### The participation rate of children from disadvantaged backgrounds was initially raised by the Department's targeting actions

- 3.4 In May 2001, as part of its TSN reporting requirements, the Department analysed<sup>16</sup> the education participation of disadvantaged individuals and groups, including children of pre-school age. This showed that the introduction of the Programme had *"equalised the participation rate of children from disadvantaged and less disadvantaged backgrounds in pre-school education, and indeed by 1999-2000 had made the participation rate of children from disadvantaged backgrounds exceed that of those from less disadvantaged backgrounds"*. However, an interim evaluation of the Department's 2001 TSN Action Plans<sup>17</sup> in April 2003 found that participation among disadvantaged children in pre-school was *"slightly lower than that at primary school level suggesting that although new places have been provided in disadvantaged areas, they are not necessarily being taken up by disadvantaged children."*
- 3.5 In our view, the contradiction portrayed in these two exercises shows that targeted programmes are not an exact science. Indeed it would be costly and difficult to

<sup>16</sup> New Targeting Social Need: Analysis of Existing Information on Education Participation, Achievement and Outcomes for Disadvantaged Groups (Department of Education, 2001)

<sup>17</sup> OFMDFM, Assessment on the Implementation of Action Plans, Deloitte and Touche, April 2003



ensure that all eligible children are found and enrolled and that all ineligible children are excluded. In any case the Programme, whilst adopting a targeted approach to begin with, is based on a presumption that there is sufficient capacity to allow all those children, whose parents wish it, to improve their future outcomes through better pre-school education.

### There was significant success in creating new pre-school places and in reducing reception places

3.6 By 2002-03 (the final year of the expansion phase) the Department had created a net total of over 9,900 new funded pre-school places (see Figure 3, paragraph 1.7), which increased provision to cover approximately 91 per cent of children in their immediate pre-school year (see **Figure 6**). By 2008-09, provision

**Figure 6: Number of children in funded pre-school and reception places 1997-98 to 2008-09**

Year	Number of children in Statutory settings	Number of children in Reception Classes	Number of children in Voluntary / Private settings	Total number of children in funded places	Level of funded provision available for children in their immediate pre-school year %
1997-98	8,541	2,575	0	11,116	45
1998-99	8,850	2,521	1,945	13,316	55
1999-00	9,999	2,330	3,407	15,736	66
2000-01	11,931	1,990	3,957	17,878	78
2001-02	13,105	1,474	5,340	19,919	83
<b>2002-03</b>	<b>14,092</b>	<b>1,180</b>	<b>5,804</b>	<b>21,076</b>	<b>91</b>
2003-04	14,014	1,044	5,913	20,971	92
2004-05	14,016	883	5,952	20,851	95
2005-06	14,224	754	5,633	20,611	96
2006-07	14,158	658	6,327	21,143	98
2007-08	13,953	630	6,535	21,118	98
2008-09	14,080	606	6,603	21,289	97

Note: Not all of the increased statutory places were established through the programme. Some 32 new nursery schools or units were provided through the EU Special Support Programme for Peace and Reconciliation.

Source: Department of Education Statistical Press Releases 1997-98 to 2008-09

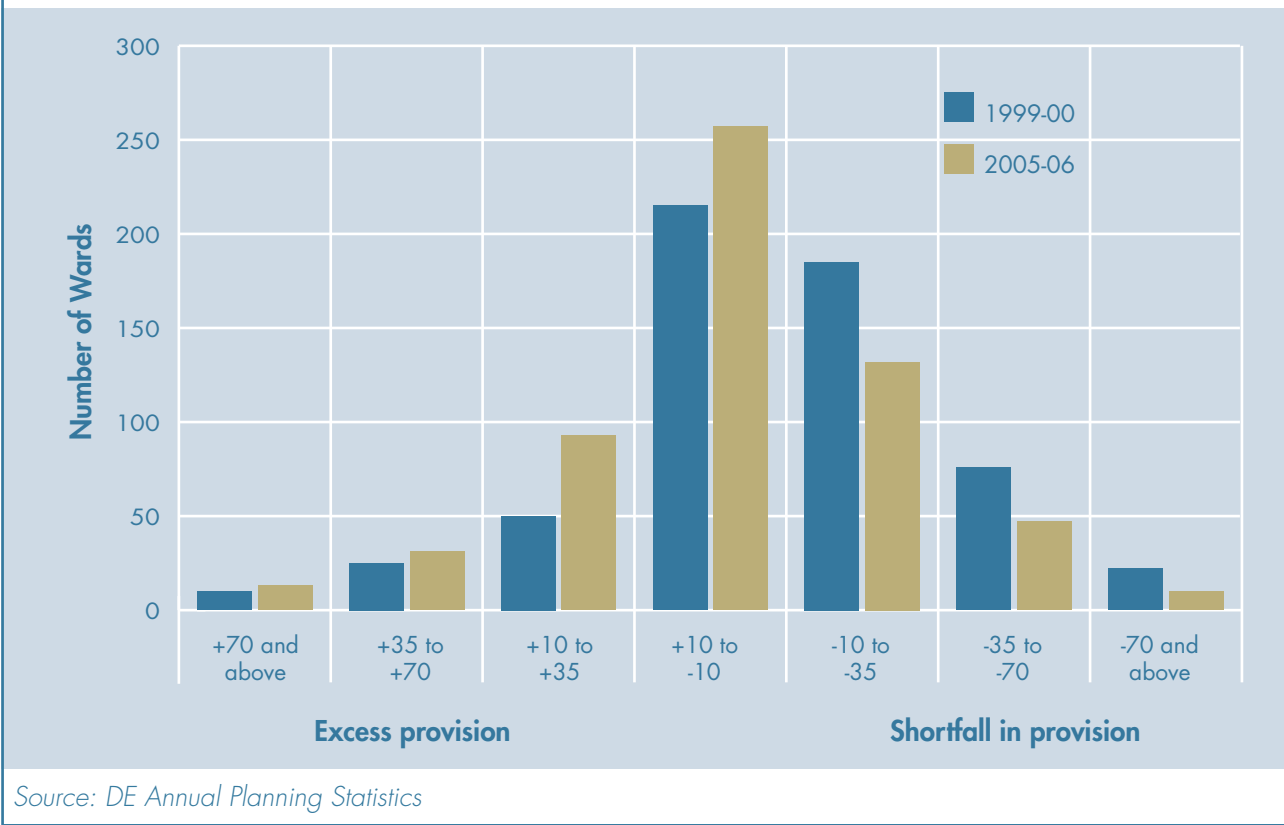
## Part Three: Accessibility and Quality of Pre-school Education

had risen to 97 per cent from a baseline of 45 per cent prior to the start of the Programme (paragraph 2.4). In addition, the Department had reduced the number of reception places from 2,575 in 1997 to 1,180 in 2002-03 - a decrease of 54 per cent. The number of reception places has continued to fall; by 2008-09 there were only 606 reception places available.

- 3.7 The primary indicator of need for the new funded pre-school places was an annual mapping exercise undertaken by the Department up until 2005-06, for each Board area, the results of which were provided to each PEAG. By mapping the

Primary 1 population<sup>18</sup> against pre-school provision, areas with significant excesses or shortfalls were identified on a ward basis. The position was then further refined, by the PEAGs themselves, to take account of local knowledge, and by the clustering of wards; as a shortfall of funded places within a particular ward may be compensated by a surplus of places in an adjacent ward. The success of this approach is illustrated, in **Figure 7**, by the increase, between 1999-00 and 2005-06, in the number of wards in the +10 to -10 range, where the level of funded places available matches most closely the projected demand for places, and by a general reduction in the

**Figure 7: Number of Wards with excesses or shortfalls in pre-school provision in 1999-00 and 2005-06**



18 The P1 population was used as a proxy for the pre-school cohort, for planning purposes

number of wards showing large shortfalls in provision.

- 3.8 The PEAGs continue to undertake annual reviews of provision taking into account factors such as unfilled places, demographic changes and the relocation/closure of settings in order to ensure that the distribution of places targets the areas of greatest need. In addition, the Department now assesses, within the resources available, the need for any new provision on a local area-based approach in order to further fine tune supply and demand. Whilst the Department has been increasingly successful in matching the provision of places with demand there are still some areas with either an excess or shortfall in provision. The Department has stated that demand cannot be matched to supply with geographical exactness because of the number of factors involved, including the non-compulsory nature of pre-school education and the constantly changing demography.

**Although the provision targets have been met, the take-up figures include a significant number of two year olds**

- 3.9 Judged against its accessibility objective, the Programme has been successful in that funded provision for children in their immediate pre-school year has exceeded the target of 90 per cent coverage (paragraph 2.5) since 2002-03, and funded provision has increased in both the statutory and voluntary/private sectors. However, as **Figure 8** shows, a significant number of two year old children have been
- educated under the Programme. While the 1986 Education Order does permit statutory nurseries to admit two year olds, this was not specifically intended under the policy. In planning the Programme, the Department had been satisfied that attendance in the nursery sector could be limited to children aged over three years and two months (i.e. children in their pre-school year), through *"the application of admissions criteria"* and had therefore decided not to take formal steps to exclude two years olds from nursery schools/classes. However, a combination of factors, namely: the increased availability of pre-school places (in both statutory and voluntary/private sectors); a decline in the pre-school population; and a higher than anticipated number of parents choosing voluntary provision over statutory provision, resulted in greater numbers of children in their penultimate pre-school year being drawn into the Programme to fill empty spaces in the statutory sector.
- 3.10 In 1997-98, prior to the start of the Programme, some three per cent of places in statutory nursery schools/classes were being taken up by two year olds. However, the proportion of two year olds increased considerably as the Programme expanded and the focus group (paragraph 2.22), convened by the Department in 2000 to look at admission arrangements, recommended that the admissions age be raised. In response to an inquiry into Early Years provision by the Northern Ireland Assembly in 2001, the Department stated that it proposed to take the first available opportunity to amend the primary legislation which allowed the admission

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**Figure 8: Excluding two year olds from the number of funded places provided has an impact on the level of coverage achieved**

Year	Total number of funded places provided	Number of funded places occupied by two year olds	Level of funded provision available for children in their immediate pre-school year %	Actual take-up of funded places by children in their immediate pre-school year (i.e. excluding two year olds) %
1997-98	11,116	261	45	44
1998-99	13,316	340	55	54
1999-00	15,736	1,090	66	62
2000-01	17,878	992	78	73
2001-02	19,919	1,423	83	77
<b>2002-03</b>	<b>21,076</b>	<b>1,758</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>83</b>
2003-04	20,971	1,929	92	83
2004-05	20,851	2,232	95	85
2005-06	20,611	1,933	96	87
2006-07	21,143	2,002	98	89
2007-08	21,118	1,636	98	91
2008-09	21,289	1,520	97	90

Source: Department of Education

of two year olds to nursery schools and classes. This has not yet been achieved although the Department told us that it had planned on two occasions, in 2002 and 2004, to avail of legislation to raise the admissions age, but that in both cases the opportunity was unavoidably lost.

- 3.11 In 2004, a review<sup>19</sup> of the Programme's progress by the Department identified the increasing number of two year olds as a major issue. The review highlighted the impact of their inclusion, both financially

and in terms of the potential adverse impact on the quality of the education experience provided for the older children.

- 3.12 In financial terms, by using data on the number of two year old children educated in pre-school settings in 2003 (1,900), the Department's review calculated a cost of £2 million per annum. The Department told us that these children had a statutory right to receive education under the Programme provided the proper admissions criteria and guidance had been adopted by the

<sup>19</sup> Review of Pre-school Education in Northern Ireland, Department of Education, June 2004, paragraph 93

respective schools. Moreover, the exclusion of two year olds from the Programme could have led to the closure of some schools, thus denying access to children who were in their immediate pre-school year.

welcome the move towards a type of early years service which is likely to be more appropriate for two year olds.

### Good quality of provision is an essential requirement of the Programme

- 3.13 With regard to the impact on quality, the review concluded that: *"...many 2 years olds are not at a stage in development where they can benefit from the experiences provided by nursery schools and classes ..."* and that *"the presence of 2 year olds in a nursery class can have an adverse effect on the quality of the educational experiences provided for the older children"*.<sup>20</sup> The Department told us that evidence now emerging from ETI suggests that many nursery schools, and nursery units attached to primary schools, have successfully designed appropriate pre-school programmes for two year olds. It also pointed out that, resources permitting, provision for two year olds under the new 0-6 Early Years Strategy may in future be a targeted service aimed at the most disadvantaged children.

- 3.14 The outcome of the current alignment of supply and demand for pre-school places has meant that to date, some £10 million has been invested in providing pre-school education for two year olds. While this provision ensured that children had a place in a pre-school setting which their parents wanted for them and in which they had a statutory right to be present, (provided the correct admissions criteria and guidance had been adopted), the Programme was, nonetheless, primarily intended to focus on, and to serve, those children in their final pre-school year. We

- 3.15 A central aim of the Programme was to ensure that the additional funded places provided good quality pre-school education. Providers wishing to be included had to meet specified quality assurance requirements and be open to inspection by ETI. For inspections covering the period from 1998 to 2006, ETI graded all pre-school centres using a four point scale:

- Grade 1 - significant strengths (good ranging to outstanding);
- Grade 2 - strengths outweigh weaknesses (satisfactory ranging to good);
- Grade 3 - weaknesses outweigh strengths (fair ranging to satisfactory); and
- Grade 4 - significant weaknesses (poor).

From 2006 onwards, ETI moved to a six point scale – see **Appendix 2**.

- 3.16 In grading pre-school provision, ETI assess centres against three main criteria: the ethos of the setting; the quality of the educational provision and the children's responses; and the management arrangements. Parental views are also

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collected through the use of questionnaires. The outcome of inspections are reported on individually and summarised in a Chief Inspector's Report published every two years.

#### ETI has reported significant improvement in the quality of those pre-school centres inspected since the start of the Programme although there has been a recent decline in grades awarded

3.17 **Figure 9** shows the progress made by the pre-school centres inspected in terms of overall effectiveness since the start of the Programme up until 2006-2008. From 2000-2006 both sectors generally showed an improvement in gradings. However, the latest Chief Inspector's Report, which covers the period 2006-2008, found that, whilst over 90 per cent of the provision inspected

was graded satisfactory or better, there had been a downward movement in the grades awarded in both the statutory and voluntary/private sectors.

3.18 The Department needs to take steps to investigate and address the reasons for this decline in effectiveness in both sectors to ensure that all pre-school children receive the highest quality of education.

#### ETI has produced a range of reports on pre-school education settings

3.19 In addition to the Chief Inspector's biennial reports, ETI has also produced a number of 'stand alone' reports which focused on specific areas of pre-school provision. These include "Begin with Quality" (2002), which compiled the results of the inspection of some 300 voluntary/private settings during

**Figure 9: Changes in Inspection Gradings from 1998-2000 to 2006-2008**

Year	Voluntary/Private Sector				Statutory Sector			
	Grade				Grade			
	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
1998-2000	23	46	27	4	Grades not available			
2000-2002	30	40	28	2	40	35	25	0
2002-2004	50	35	14	<1	53	45	2	0
2004-2006	46	48	6	0	66	30	4	0
2006-2008	34	54	9	3	54	44	2	0

Note: The six point scale used for 2006-2008 has been converted into the equivalent four point scale by ETI for comparison purposes

Source: Education and Training Inspectorate

**Figure 10: Summary findings from the main ETI Inspection Reports on pre-school education settings**

Report	Findings
Begin With Quality (2002)	<i>"The overall quality of provision had improved steadily over the (first) three years (of the Programme) with over 70 per cent of settings providing pre-school education of a satisfactory, good or very good quality".</i>
The Quality of Educational Provision for Reception Children in Primary Schools (2004)	<i>"Most teachers are hard-working and have good relationships with the reception children". "In most of the schools (over 80%), the educational provision for reception children was less than satisfactory".</i>
Chief Inspectors Report 2002-04 (2005)	<i>"The pre-school expansion programme has increased the provision of good quality pre-school places. Since 2002 the findings from inspection show that the quality of pre-school education is rising in statutory nursery and voluntary/private provision".</i>
Chief Inspectors Report 2004-06 (2007)	<i>"Standards of pre-school education are good or better in well over half the centres and continue to improve."</i>
Chief Inspectors Report 2006-08 (2009)	<i>"The quality of pre-school education is satisfactory or better in almost all of the settings inspected....," "There has been a small decline in the overall effectiveness of pre-school provision which is a cause for concern."</i>

Source: Education and Training Inspectorate Reports

the first three years of the Programme and "The Quality of Educational Provision for Reception Children in Primary Schools" (2004). This body of work indicates that, on the whole, there has been an improvement in the quality of pre-school education since the introduction of the Programme (see **Figure 10**).

### The effectiveness of pre-school education has been evaluated

- 3.20 While the inspection process provides positive feedback on the quality of inputs into pre-school education, a policy

intervention like the expansion Programme ultimately has to generate added value in terms of the outcomes achieved by the children it supports. Children who participate in the Programme are expected to gain a number of important benefits including: an ability to learn new skills; solve cognitive problems and absorb knowledge; as well as learning the self-discipline and behavioural skills that help them perform better in the classroom. In addition, high quality pre-school provision has been identified by ETI as an effective vehicle for the early identification of, and intervention for, children with special educational needs.

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### Accessibility and Quality of Pre-school Education

- 3.21 An analytical framework to provide some evidence of the impact of the Programme was established under the Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI)<sup>21</sup> project which reported in 2006. This investigated the longitudinal effects of pre-school education and care on the development of a sample of 800 children (aged between 3-8 years) until the end of Key Stage 1. The project used a range of information in coming to its conclusions, including: standardised child assessments; child social/behavioural profiles completed by pre-school and primary school staff; interviews with parents and pre-school staff; and observed quality rating scales.
- 3.22 In order to build a profile of each child's intellectual and social/behavioural development, children in the sample were first assessed on joining the study (at age three to four years) and again at entry to school to compare progress. The children were further assessed at the end of Years 1, 2, 3, and 4 in primary school. A sample of 'home' children was subsequently recruited to the study at entry to school as a comparison with the pre-school education group. The study found that *"pre-school experience, compared with none, enhances children's development. Having allowed for any differences in background factors that might affect development, 'home' children (those with little or no pre-school centre experience) show poorer cognitive and social/behavioural outcomes at entry to school and at the end of Year 1 than those who attended pre-school."*
- 3.23 EPPNI also demonstrated *"the positive effects of high quality pre-school provision on children's intellectual and social behavioural development up to the end of Key Stage 1 in primary school"*. The results showed that the type of pre-school centre is important and that *"children benefit more from nursery schools and nursery classes or playgroups, rather than from other types of pre-school provision"*. The report recommended *"that these types of provision should be expanded in their coverage of the population rather than other types of provision"*. The project also found that reception classes had little beneficial effect on children's development and concluded that resources would achieve more if they were redirected from this sector to the more beneficial nursery schools and classes or playgroups.
- 3.24 The EPPNI report also indicated that those children at risk of developing learning or behavioural difficulties are helped by the pre-school experience and that the effects are greater the better the quality of the pre-school. The report put forward a number of proposals which EPPNI considered necessary to address the problems associated with these particular children. **Appendix 3** provides further detail of the findings of the project which may have implications for future early years policy and practice, including specific proposals relating to at risk children.
- 3.25 The establishment of the EPPNI project by the Department at the outset of the Programme is an excellent example of planned evaluation. The study has been valuable as it has provided robust

21 E Melhuish, L Quinn, K Hanna, K Sylva, P Sammons, I Siraj-Blatchford and B Taggart (2006) *The Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Summary Report*: A longitudinal study funded by the Department of Education, Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and the Social Steering Group.



research-based evidence of the positive benefits of pre-school education. In light of the particular value of pre-school education to children at risk of developing learning or behavioural difficulties, which EPPNI identified, we would encourage the Department to take the necessary steps to support and develop sustainable provision which meets these needs.

### The Department carried out a formal review of the Programme

3.26 Current guidance recommends that existing policy is *"constantly reviewed to ensure it is really dealing with the problems it was designed to solve,"*<sup>22</sup> by having an ongoing review programme in place and/or mechanisms which *"allow service deliverers/customers to provide feedback direct to policy-makers"*. In line with this guidance, the Department undertook a formal review of the Programme in June 2004 as part of its wider review of pre-school education in Northern Ireland.

3.27 As part of the review, the Department published a consultation document and invited comments from relevant groups involved in pre-school education on a number of structural and operational issues which had arisen as the Programme had progressed. The relevant groups included schools; voluntary/private playgroups; the public and parents; and stakeholder education partner organisations. The main issues consulted on were the pre-school admissions age; the pattern of full-time and part-time provision; the removal of reception provision; and issues common

to the statutory and voluntary/private sectors. In addition, the Department sought comments on how integrated services could be developed.

3.28 Following the consultation process, in April 2006 the Department produced an Outcomes Document which outlined a number of issues to be dealt with in the short term. As a result, the following decisions were taken:

- to raise the admissions age to 3 years and 2 months, equalising the age at which free pre-school places are available across all providers;
- to retain the existing pattern of fulltime provision;
- to remove the priority in admission for children born between 2 July and 31 August (the priority for social disadvantage was to be maintained); and
- to prevent schools offering reception places.

Although these decisions have been taken, legislation is required in most cases before any of the proposed changes can be implemented.

3.29 The consultation process also identified a wide range of other issues which required further attention by the Department. These centred on the workforce; the funding of voluntary/private pre-school providers; and provision for children with special educational needs.

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### Accessibility and Quality of Pre-school Education

#### **The pre-school workforce is the key element in raising the quality of provision**

- 3.30 As referred to in paragraph 3.23, the quality of provision is a critical factor in realising the potential benefits of pre-school education. Only high quality services can deliver the benefits research has identified, and the single most important factor influencing the quality of these services is the workforce.
- 3.31 The Department acknowledged, in its 2004 review, the difficulties faced by both the statutory and voluntary/private pre-school settings in providing the appropriate support and training for their workforces. It states, for example, that, *"...many voluntary/private settings, particularly smaller ones, find it difficult to meet the requirements of the Programme, such as the need to employ Early Years Specialists"*<sup>23</sup> (in a supporting role). It also recognised that statutory settings may not have received as much assistance and support as they needed, and Boards might wish to provide, due to constraints on resources. Responses to the review also pointed to the need for improved training and development opportunities – for example, a number of Boards identified the need for *"ongoing professional development"* and the creation of a *"comprehensive workforce strategy"* in order to provide training, support and a development framework for all early years settings.
- 3.32 The latest Chief Inspector's report<sup>24</sup> drew attention to the variation in the level and quality of professional external support available to the pre-school sector and the

comparatively lower levels of qualifications and training for staff in the voluntary/private sector. It also found that there was *"a need to provide for the further development of the professional skill and expertise of staff within pre-school settings"* and it considered that there was the need for *"an improvement in the specialist advice and support available to staff, particularly in the voluntary and private sectors"*.

- 3.33 Increasing the number of skilled and qualified pre-school workers is a key aspect of maintaining the quality of early years education. It is important that the Department ensures that a professional development framework is created for the workforce. In our view, such a framework will raise the profile and professionalism of the workforce and provide a structured and accredited route for workers as they progress through their careers. This would apply equally across statutory and voluntary/private providers, so that parents can be sure of the quality and skills of staff whichever pre-school provider they choose. The Department told us that these workforce issues are being considered as part of its work on the 0-6 Early Years Strategy (paragraph 2.10).

#### **Voluntary and private providers play a key role in the Programme but they face particular challenges because of the current funding arrangements**

- 3.34 The mixed economy of pre-school provision offers flexibility and choice and should be able to adapt to local needs and circumstances. For example, services may

23 Review of Pre-school Education in Northern Ireland, Department of Education, June 2004, paragraph 120

24 The Chief Inspector's Report, 2006-2008, ETI 2009

be needed by communities at different times of the day, and the needs of families can change over time. Although the voluntary and private sectors are key providers of pre-school education, evidence indicates that they face particular challenges around the delivery of quality services within the level of Programme funding provided by the Department, particularly the smaller voluntary/private settings. A number of responses to the 2004 Departmental Review called for *"equity of funding between settings and sectors"* and advocated a more flexible approach to funding which would allow smaller pre-school settings to become more sustainable in the longer-term. The Department pointed out that there are considerable additional costs related to the teacher trained workforce in the statutory sector which the voluntary/private sector does not have to bear.

- 3.35 In January 2009, the lower level of resourcing in the voluntary/private sector was identified by ETI as a contributory factor in the small decline in the overall effectiveness of pre-school provision. ETI also stated that, in those voluntary/private centres where the number of funded places is small, the subsequent lack of resources impinges adversely on the quality of the children's experiences. ETI considered that, in preparing its strategy for 0-6 provision, the Department will need to review the disparities in funding and the discrepancies in the quality of provision which exist for those children in different pre-school settings.

- 3.36 We feel that differences in funding levels may contribute to unnecessary and unhelpful quality differences and perceptions of status between providers, limit potential benefits to children, and, in the longer term, reduce parental choice by removing some voluntary/private providers from the Programme. We acknowledge the Department's current consideration of the different funding arrangements for statutory and voluntary/private pre-school settings under the 0-6 Early Years Strategy. We feel that a more flexible approach could help to secure the existence of some struggling smaller centres. By encouraging the creation of further viable voluntary/private pre-school centres this approach could also speed up the removal of reception classes in those rural areas where there is currently no other alternative provision.

### **Provision for children with special educational needs**

- 3.37 One area highlighted by ETI where improvement has been limited is in the provision for special educational needs in pre-school education. The policy document *Investing in Early Learning* had stated that *"appropriate provision will be available for children with special educational needs and that all providers will be able, with support where necessary, to identify and meet those needs."* However, over the course of the Programme inspection evidence has shown the provision for special educational needs to be *"inconsistent, fragmentary and overly dependant on one-off funding initiatives or*

## Part Three:

### Accessibility and Quality of Pre-school Education

*projects". ETI reported in 2006 that "there is not yet a coherent and appropriately funded approach to meet effectively the children's needs involving the relevant Departments and statutory and voluntary agencies."*<sup>25</sup>

- 3.38 ETI's survey of Special Educational Needs in the Pre-school Sector<sup>26</sup> in 2006 reinforced its inspection findings. The survey found little improvement in special educational needs provision within the voluntary/private sector. It stated that if standards were to rise, staff in these centres needed better training, resources, support services and access to specialist services. It also noted that although the statutory sector had significantly better arrangements overall and made better provision for special educational needs, in this sector there remained areas for improvement in over one third of those inspected. ETI reported in 2009<sup>27</sup> that there had been a slight improvement in the quality of the provision made for special educational needs over the period 2006-2008 but that much remains to be done. It again found that provision remains much stronger in the statutory sector and that this reflected the variation in the levels of training, available expertise, and support and funding across pre-school settings.

- 3.39 We acknowledge that the Programme sets high minimum quality standards for all children. However, we also recognise that a "one size fits all" approach is unlikely to work in a pre-school setting. Supplementary support can and should be offered to families who need help in meeting children's special educational

needs. We also acknowledge the ongoing work being done by the Department in relation to meeting these needs in the pre-school settings. We note specifically that the Department's current Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion involves consideration of early intervention and pre-school assessment and provision. We would encourage the Department to ensure that the review addresses not only the issues raised by ETI of specialist training, integration and effective collaboration between the various education, health and social security agencies, but also the proposals put forward by EPPNI in relation to those children at risk of developing learning or behavioural difficulties (paragraph 3.24).

25 The Chief Inspectors Report 2002-2004, ETI 2006

26 'The Best For All Our Children' A Survey by the Educational and Training Inspectorate of Special Educational Needs in the Preschool Sector, ETI 2006

27 The Chief Inspector's Report 2006-2008, ETI 2009



## Appendix One: (paragraph 2.6)

### Funding arrangements and main conditions applying to statutory and voluntary/private sector providers

	Statutory Sector	Voluntary /Private Sector
<b>Recurrent Funding</b>	Pupils in nursery schools and classes are funded under the Local Management of Schools Scheme. From April 2005 delegated funding has been provided by a Common Funding Scheme and the level of funding is determined mainly by pupil numbers at each school. Additional financial support is also available through a range of other funding factors.	Funded by direct grant, payable by the Board in instalments each year, at a flat rate per child, which is reviewed annually.  1998-99 rate = £1,100 2008-09 rate = £1,445
<b>Capital Funding</b>	Capital funding was made available for new grant aided nursery provision (and conversions) to enable the statutory sector to secure places within the Programme.	No capital funding was made available for building.  Note: A voluntary playgroups initiative provided £750,000 over the three years 2004-05 to 2006-07 for small capital projects.
<b>Inspection</b>	Providers must be open to inspection by the Education Training Inspectorate (ETI).  Note: ETI already inspected nursery schools and nursery classes as part of its function of inspecting all schools.	Providers must be open to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI)  Note: Registered playgroups and private nurseries are already inspected annually by Health and Social Services Trust Inspection Teams under the Children's (NI) Order 1995.
<b>Staffing ratios</b>	An adult child ratio of 1:13 for each class of 26 children.	An adult child ratio of 1:8.
<b>Staffing qualifications</b>	Staff should comprise a qualified teacher and a qualified nursery assistant.	At least half the staff must hold a relevant qualification in education or childcare.
<b>Accommodation</b>	Required to meet the Department's standards in respect of accommodation for nursery and primary school provision.	Required to conform to the standards set out in the Children (NI) Order 1995 Regulations and Guidance on Family Support, Childminding and Day Care.

<b>Involvement of Qualified Teacher or Early Years Specialist</b>	In all pre-school centres receiving funding from the Programme, evidence is required of support from a qualified teacher or early years specialist holding a specified qualification.
<b>Group Size and Composition</b>	All providers are required to ensure that there are at least 8 children in their immediate pre-school year (whether in a funded place or not) in each group in the centre. A maximum group size of 26 children per group will apply in all centres.
<b>Information for parents</b>	All providers are expected to make a range of information available to parents, including admissions policy, curriculum on offer and reports on children's progress.
<b>Curriculum</b>	All providers are required to offer a curriculum which follows the Curricular Guidance for Pre-school Education. The latest version published in 2006 incorporates developments since 1997, including the Foundation Stage and changes to Year 1 and Year 2 curriculum.
<i>Source: Investing in Early Learning, 1998</i>	

## Appendix Two: (paragraph 3.15)

### ETI's original and revised inspection grades

Original Grade 1998-2006	Revised Grade 2006 onwards	Descriptor	Terms used in Inspection Reports
1	1	Outstanding characterised by excellence	Outstanding or excellent provision. No follow-up inspection required.
1	2	Consistently good	Major strengths with no significant/ reported areas for improvement. No follow-up inspection required.
2	3	Many good features but some areas for improvement which the school/organisation has the capacity to address	Strengths in important areas with a small number of minor areas for improvement. No formal follow-up inspection – the school's/organisation's progress on the areas for improvement will be monitored by the District Inspector.
2	4	Overall sound/satisfactory but with some areas for improvement which need to be addressed	Strengths in many aspects of the educational/pastoral provision with a few important areas for improvement to be addressed.
3	5	Significant weaknesses which outweigh strengths	A few strengths but important/ substantial areas for improvement which require prompt action. Follow-up inspection required.
4	6	Poor	Major shortcomings which require urgent action. Follow-up inspection within a short period.

Source: Education and Training Inspectorate



## Appendix Three: (paragraph 3.24)

### Key findings from the EPPNI Project

Key findings over the pre-school period	
<i>Impact of attending a pre-school</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-school experience enhances cognitive and social development in all children.</li> <li>• Full time attendance had no benefits for cognitive development at the start of primary school compared to part-time provision.</li> <li>• Disadvantaged children benefit even more where they are with a mixture of children from different social backgrounds.</li> </ul>
<i>Does type of pre-school matter?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• There are significant differences between pre-school settings and their impact on children. Nursery schools/classes have the overall best outcomes, with good outcomes also for playgroups. Other types of pre-school produce benefits but to a lesser extent.</li> </ul>
<i>Effects of quality and specific 'practices' in pre-school</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High quality pre-schooling is related to better intellectual and social/behavioural development for children.</li> <li>• Observed quality within pre-school settings was higher in nursery schools and classes.</li> <li>• Staff training and qualifications are associated with better quality of provision.</li> </ul>

Key findings at the end of Key Stage 1 (KS1)	
<i>Enduring effects</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advantageous effects of pre-school were evident throughout KS1, with some reduction in strength for some outcomes compared to school entry.</li> </ul>
<i>Type of pre-school</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Type of pre-school was related to longer term effects with effects most strong for nursery schools and classes, with playgroups closely following, and less long-lasting effects for other types of pre-school.</li> </ul>
<i>Quality of pre-school</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pre-school quality was significantly related to children's development over the first four years of primary school.</li> </ul>
<i>Vulnerable children</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Children 'at risk' of learning or behavioural difficulties are helped by pre-school experience and the effects are greater the better the quality of the pre-school and persist until the end of KS1.</li> </ul>

## Appendix Three: (paragraph 3.24)

### Specific proposals related to vulnerable ('at risk') children

- Efforts should be made to increase the take-up of pre-school places by parents who would not usually send their children to pre-school (usually found in geographical clusters or specific minority ethnic groups). This would provide vulnerable groups of children with a better start to school and reduce their risk of developing Special Educational Needs (SEN).
- All pre-school and school staff should be aware that boys have increased 'risk' of developing SEN for cognitive development and aspects of social development. Increased focus on the specific needs of boys, as learners, linked with appropriate staff development may have long-term benefits and help reduce the gender gap in SEN.
- Increasing active parental engagement with children and involvement in play activities that promote children's language, spatial skills and creativity, in particular, are likely to benefit children's subsequent cognitive and social development and attainment at school.
- The strong link between 'at risk' status and multiple disadvantage, indicates that ways of effectively targeting additional resources to pre-school and school settings that serve high proportions of young children from multiple disadvantaged families should be explored.

*Source: Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) Summary Report by E Melhuish, L Quinn, K Hanna, K Sylva, P Sammons, I Siraj-Blatchford and B Taggart, 2006*

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