



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS
COMMITTEE**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**‘The Pre-school Education Expansion
Programme’**

14 January 2010

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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‘The Pre-school Education Expansion Programme’

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Maskey (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mr John Dallat
Mr Jeffrey Donaldson
Mr David Hilditch
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Patsy McGlone
Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
Ms Dawn Purvis
Mr Jim Shannon

Witnesses:

Dr Robson Davison)	
Mr Will Haire)	Department of Education
Ms Linda Wilson)	

Also in attendance:

Mr Kieran Donnelly)	Comptroller and Auditor General
Ms Fiona Hamill)	Treasury Officer of Accounts

The Chairperson (Mr P Maskey):

The next item of business is the evidence session on matters that were raised in the Audit Office report ‘The Pre-school Education Expansion Programme’. Does any member wish to express an interest in that matter?

Mr Beggs:

I declare an interest as a governor of Glynn Primary School and as a committee member of Horizon Sure Start.

The Chairperson:

My wife works for Sure Start, and I am a board member of the Upper Andersonstown Community Forum, which, I believe, is involved in preschool and other education initiatives.

Mr Craig:

I declare an interest as a governor of Killowen Primary School and Harmony Hill Primary School, both of which are in Lisburn.

The Chairperson:

Thanks. Will Haire, the accounting officer in the Department of Education, is here to respond to the Committee. Mr Haire will introduce his colleagues; all three witnesses are welcome

Mr Will Haire (Department of Education):

Dr Robson Davison is the deputy secretary for school and youth policy in the Department of Education, and Linda Wilson is director of families and communities.

The Chairperson:

I ask the witnesses to speak up a wee bit, because the bad acoustics in this room make it difficult for members, including me, to hear. I will begin, and other members will ask questions after mine.

I take the witnesses straight to paragraphs 1.5 and 1.6 of the report, which show that private voluntary providers received £1,445 for each child for the year 2008-09, whereas statutory providers received up to £2,855. Was it fair to introduce differing funding levels and other arrangements in various sectors when the intention was to have an equal partnership?

Mr Haire:

The issue of funding size relates to the fact that some funding here is for full-time provision and some is for part-time provision. That division is indicated in figure 2. Given that all work in the voluntary sector is part time, that is used as the comparator, and the figure at the moment is about

£1,400 for each unit.

That policy originated from a desire to rapidly expand the voluntary sector and to give financial security to what was unfunded voluntary activity, to bring it in and to work with it in partnership to drive up standards.

As you will see in the rest of the report, the voluntary sector had great strength in the past. We have benefited greatly from a lot of work that the former Northern Ireland Pre-School Playgroup Association (NIPPA), Barnardo's and many other organisations did. Having brought in their skills, we worked on a national scheme to give them the rates that were appropriate for their skill levels. Professional teachers are employed in the statutory nursery sector, and they are paid at a higher level. Therefore, costs are higher. Drawing that in at that time was the correct choice to make. However, as we go forward and move towards the completion of work on the early-years strategy for consultation, we recognise that there are issues about how we can support more fully the professional development of the voluntary sector and ensure that it has the resources to achieve all that it can.

At present, therefore, you are paying for somewhat different skills levels and processes. It was appropriate to start that development in that policy cycle, and it is one that we recognise that we have to advance. There is an issue of change and, of course, a question of affordability and of how we should proceed.

The Chairperson:

Funding from private and voluntary providers was some £1,400 less for each child. Was there less benefit to the children in those sectors?

Mr Haire:

The third section of the report deals with educational outcomes and the research — the longitudinal effective preschool provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) study — that we commissioned. It indicates that much of our voluntary and community sector work has been excellent. Inspectors tell us that the preschool sector is one of the strongest. Overall, outcomes are strong. Of course, we must work with and help some individual providers. However, in general, there is great strength in the sector, and a great deal of excellent work has been done in that sector. The nursery school sector is particularly strong. There are strong figures for at least a

third of the voluntary sector providers, where excellent quality is being produced.

The Chairperson:

Is the voluntary sector better value for money?

Mr Haire:

It is difficult to answer that exactly, because working in education involves dealing with somewhat distinct areas and communities. The statutory sector is comprised of 52% of nursery schools. The core of that sector is in the 25% most deprived wards. In comparison, the voluntary and community sector is spread widely, and overall it is in somewhat less deprived areas. That is an interesting concentration. Our identification of that represents good targeting. Perhaps we will return to that issue. You are dealing with somewhat different areas in the process. The aim must be to ensure that every child is well equipped to meet the needs of the primary school foundation stage and years 1 and 2 by the time that they leave preschool.

We recognise, and the studies that we have done emphasise, that targeting resources and support to families and communities in areas of deprivation can have greater return and value for money. It can advance the personal and educational development of a child more rapidly. That has been strongly emphasised by the research that we have undertaken.

The Chairperson:

Figure 7 of the report shows that there is considerable shortfall in a number of wards. Can you explain where those wards are and what action you have taken to address that shortfall?

Mr Haire:

The Department carried out that piece of work to give us a sense of how the careful planning process of the preschool education advisory group (PEAG) is working. As the report illustrates, in many situations, provision is close to some people but is in an adjoining ward. There is not going to be a perfect match in the centre. The shift between 1999-2000 and 2005-06 has shown that provision is congregating towards the centre as the PEAG groups have gradually worked to move it. However, you are never going to get perfect congruence, because children and families do not work in wards. Ideally, our aim is to get preschool provision within two miles of the home in urban areas and within five miles in rural areas.

Although we cannot say that the alignment of the provision is perfect, we think that it is working reasonably well. It is difficult, because parents will, naturally, hear about particular nurseries or preschools that they really want their children to go to, and they will go for those. However, if they do not get what they want, they become concerned. Committee members, as MLAs, will hear about those concerns, as will the Department. We continually try to get the right match in the 700 settings in which we give preschool provision, but it is not perfect. Nevertheless, for the more than 10 years that the PEAG process has been in place, we have worked with the sector, the boards, the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) and everyone who is involved in the PEAGs process to try to achieve that alignment of quality provision, which changes continually. Demography changes, and that is one of the key problems. We have had a downturn over the past couple of years, although we are now seeing an upturn in the number of two- and three-year-olds. That will have implications. Generally, we think that the report shows that we are getting better, but it is a very difficult matter to get right, and there will not be a perfect provision for every ward.

The Chairperson:

Paragraph 3.17 states that the latest chief inspector's report, which covers the period 2006-08, found that there had been a downward movement in grades awarded to both the statutory and the voluntary and private sectors. What is the reason behind that, and what are you doing about it?

Mr Haire:

As I stressed at the beginning, this is a strong phase of education. In his advice to us on the issue, the chief inspector said:

“There has been a small decline in the overall effectiveness of pre-school provision”.

He gave a number of reasons for that decline, including the fact that several new providers have come into the sector. The voluntary and community sector has been drawn into the process during the past 10 years. We have been looking at best practice and at stabilising and improving standards, and the inspectorate has told us that that has been achieved. The new providers are made up of small organisations — possibly one or two individuals — and the process can sometimes take time. There is a question about how we support those organisations as we move forward.

There is also a question about resources, and we must take that into account. We are dealing with that as we move forward with the early-years strategy. The question of qualifications has thrown up a challenge to the voluntary and community sector. You asked what we are doing practically about it. We work with the voluntary and community sector. In 2006-08, 12% of providers were in grades 3 and 4, which are not grades that we want. There are 15 providers, and each is required to come back within a year with a plan showing how it will improve and deal with the issues that the inspectorate suggested. The providers are inspected after one year to see what they have achieved. Twelve of the 15 providers are now in the new grade 3, which is a good grade; it has moved from grades four to six. It is a good provision. They have taken the message and improved, and I should say that that generally happens with our inspections.

Three providers have closed, either because the numbers have fallen away or because they have just dropped out due to closures in a specific area. The same thing does happen and has happened in the statutory sector. If we see problems, we make sure that they are followed up, because children go through the education process only once. Our Every School a Good School policy applies to all nursery schools. We will be careful to work appropriately with the community and voluntary sectors to ensure that high standards are maintained. That is a key theme of the early-years strategy, and we are taking practical steps in that regard.

Although there is strength in the sector, we are not complacent. We have to ensure that issues, whatever their setting, are being addressed at the right level, and our processes seek to do that.

The Chairperson:

The Education and Training Inspectorate is part of the Department, but I know that there are other stand-alone bodies that sit outside the Department's control. Even though the inspectorate works for your Department, can you assure us that the system is impartial?

Mr Haire:

That is a key issue for me. There is no use in having an inspectorate that tells me nice things to make my life easier. There is absolute clarity on that issue. I will not let anyone interfere with the inspectorate's reports, nor am I involved in that process. I frequently address the inspectorate on that point and emphasise that it has a key role in telling it as it is. That role is valuable, because we commission the inspectorate to carry out survey work, and it has an influence on our policy thinking. It is totally free in its inspection role, and if I want to drive up effectiveness, it

would be ludicrous, as well as morally wrong, for me to do anything else.

The Chairperson:

Given the concerns that have been raised about the quality of some preschool provision, have you ever had to consider withdrawing providers from the programme because they have been inadequate or not up to standard?

Mr Haire:

There are a number of issues to consider. Clearly, if we saw continuing failures that were not being addressed, we would have to intervene. We will not pay for something that is failing. Where there are issues and problems, such as staff turnover, that take time to sort out, the great majority of providers deal with those quickly, and we are delighted to work with them. However, there have been instances in which providers have dropped out and had to close. Parents hear about any issues, and a natural process takes place. We will certainly not sit back and let poor provision continue; we will help people to sort things out.

The Chairperson:

Have you ever had to take action and withdraw provision?

Mr Haire:

I am not aware that that has happened at our level or at education and library board level, and the reason is that the problems that have arisen have been sorted in every case. People have either gone or the provider has been closed. We take a very serious position on that.

The Chairperson:

Perhaps you could forward any additional information on that issue to the Committee.

Mr Hilditch:

I have a couple of simple questions to ask. Figure 8 at paragraph 3.9 indicates satisfaction at the rise in the percentage take-up of preschool places. Over an 11-year period the take-up has gone from 44% to 90%. Is that as good as it gets, or do we still have work to do? Is that satisfactory, or do we need to push further?

Mr Haire:

The advice that we got when we started the service was that it was likely that approximately 90% of parents would want to take it up. Many parents have strong views about and want to look after their children's education, and we respect that. Preschool is a non-compulsory phase of education, but we start our compulsory phase earlier than anywhere else in Europe.

We seemed to reach that uptake level fairly quickly. The Department used the household survey five times between 2001 and 2003 to check that figure, and it confirmed that uptake was approximately 90%. Higher provision is available, and as the report points out, one of the reasons for that is that two-year-olds come into the provision. However, we are reaching the right level overall. That said, and returning to the Chairperson's point, the Department recognises that preschools are limited in size and cannot be expanded, given the impact that it would have on children's safety. Preschools are very popular voluntary sector areas that are very close to people, and we cannot always expand to meet individual needs. It has been possible in certain areas, and the Department feels that it is generally meeting need. There are individual cases of people having to travel further, and the Department recognises that. Unfortunately, that is a reality of this type of provision.

Mr Hilditch:

You mentioned that parental choice is a factor in that 10% of children who do not take up a place in preschool education. A lack of provision and the fact that some of those children come from disadvantaged areas are factors, but what others have influenced that figure?

Mr Haire:

As the report makes clear, one of the Department's priorities was to expand most rapidly in disadvantaged areas. That was done geographically early in the investment, but it has now been spread effectively. The Department has tried to achieve a range of provision.

Early-years education is non-sectoral in some ways, but we recognise that there are sectoral parts of education that are relevant to communities, and we try to make that choice clear. The Department has made over 70 provisions available for the Irish-medium sector, and the particular needs of the children of military personnel and the Travelling community means that special provision has been made for them. The Department tries to deal with those issues distinctly and has flexibility in doing so.

Mr Hilditch:

Are you happy with the way that things have been approached? Has there been any departmental crossover with, for example, the Department for Social Development (DSD) on those other issues?

Mr Haire:

As far as DSD is concerned, a great deal of work for the provision of preschool education came from Making Belfast Work and other initiatives in the early days. However, that area is one in which the Department of Education has now taken a strong lead. Crossover occurred when the Department took responsibility for the Sure Start programme three years ago.

Some other work also came from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), and there has been a very close working relationship between the Department of Education and DHSSPS. Indeed, DHSSPS has a key role to play in child protection and other areas in the voluntary sector. Given that child protection is so key in that area, we ensure that the liaison is strong between the two Departments.

Mr Craig:

I want to refer back to figure 7. The Chairman mentioned the overprovision and underprovision of places in wards, and one of the interesting things that I noticed was that the Department targeted deprived wards in the past. I live in a ward that could not be described as deprived; in fact, the opposite would be the case, yet there has been an historic underprovision in that ward. How many of the wards that are under consideration and that could be described as middle class or beyond have had an underprovision of places?

Mr Haire:

I am sorry; I do not have the analysis that you requested. However, the preschool education advisory groups in each of the education and library board areas examined that area.

One of the key problems is that there could be adjacent wards where different types of people are living quite close to one another. The real question is whether high-quality provision in one ward causes deprivation in a neighbouring ward where there is lower-quality provision. Parents may be quite happy to move their children into the ward that has better provision. I emphasise

that we never said that it is a perfect match, and we will keep working at it.

It also throws up a wider issue. We run a complex education structure in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the nature of our society means that it is probably one of the most complex in Europe. To a certain extent, that complexity is replicated in our preschool provision. We generally want to keep preschools as close to individual families as possible.

We have 700 settings, many of which are quite small. Over time, we may be able to have better provision if we area plan. However, area planning is far from an exact science, and south Belfast is a classic example. One very popular preschool there has 88 first preferences for only 52 available places. However, within a very short distance, there are preschools that parents will not send their children to. Parental choice is a big issue and one that we have to work on all the time.

Mr Craig:

I do not dispute what you say. However, I think that there is an historic problem with provision in rural and in what would be described as middle-class areas. It would be good if the Department provided the Committee with some information on that.

We talk about the private and voluntary sector filling the gaps. I have noticed that the private sector in my own ward has been underfunded and, therefore, hampered in its best efforts to fill the gaps and increase provision. How does the Department compare private sector preschool provision with state funded preschool provision? You talked about parental choice. However, if the state pours huge funds into preschool provision only a few miles from an area where private sector provision has been struggling for years, it will obviously have a hugely detrimental effect on the private sector there.

Mr Haire:

It was agreed at the beginning of the process that 50% of the expansion programme would be in the statutory sector and 50% would be in the community and voluntary and private sectors. There are about 30 providers in the private sector, which is a relatively small number. There are about 10 times more providers in the community and voluntary sector than in the private sector. We expanded provision by creating five new nursery schools and about 100 new nursery units in primary schools. Some of those had been reception places that were made into proper nursery

units. Nursery provision is probably more urban because of the sizes that are involved, but nursery units are well spread across the system.

We funded the voluntary and community and the private sector. As I explained, we are buying a lower level of qualification in the community and voluntary sector than in the statutory sector. Qualification and pay levels are lower in the community and voluntary sector. Our thinking is that we will have to move towards an equalisation by working with the community and voluntary sector to improve its professional qualifications. Had we demanded teaching qualifications at the beginning, we would have wiped out the voluntary and community sector and the private sector straight away, because such a demand would have been too much. There is great strength in those sectors, and their provision is of a high quality.

We must move forward gradually in that area. We want to get those issues right; that is our direction of travel. Although one could look at it as the statutory sector versus the voluntary and community sector, there is a commonality in those sectors; it is about providing quality education. We were right to adopt a partnership approach because the voluntary sector had developed many good educational aspects and its connections with the community had been a strong aspect of preschool education. We did not want to lose that while trying to make this phase work more effectively.

Dr Robson Davison (Department of Education):

Jonathan Craig asked about the private sector. The plan for nursery schools and nursery classes is now largely developed. If we were to receive proposals for new nursery schools or new nursery classes, they would go through the development proposal process and we would gather intelligence about the nature of overall provision in an area. Moreover, we would take advice from the relevant PEAG about the nature of provision in that area. Therefore, it is unlikely that, if sufficient private sector provision already exists, we would support the creation of new provision that would be in competition with the private sector or voluntary sector. We take into account the overall provision in areas for which we have received new proposals for nursery schools or nursery classes.

Mr Craig:

Would the Department take into account the number of places created by any new provision to try to stop parental choice skewing the service? If new, much better provision is built in an area,

parents will automatically want to place their children in that new provision. What can be done to alleviate the issue of people flooding to a new facility?

Dr Davison:

That is difficult. If we were to build a new facility now, it would be to replace provision that is regarded as physically substandard. Therefore, replacing a facility that defensibly had to be replaced is not quite the same as creating additional provision. Those are two different sets of circumstances. When creating additional provision, we would undoubtedly take into account the full nature of provision that services an area. When replacing substandard provision, we would simply be replacing substandard provision.

Mr Craig:

What numbers are involved?

Dr Davison:

Sometimes there is expansion, and sometimes it is a difference in the nature of the provision. Different factors are at play.

Mr Haire:

Generally, the numbers have stabilised in the last while, and the numbers of children have, generally, been fairly tight until recently. The area covered by the Southern Education and Library Board has faced an expansion in numbers. At the moment, we are dealing with issues that have arisen partly because new families have arrived in that area. The capacity in that area was insufficient to expand the voluntary sector; therefore, we have worked with a nursery unit there to expand its provision.

We are flexible on that issue. However, on a number of occasions, we have turned down development proposals to avoid a big move between the two sectors. We are clear about that, and the figures indicate that there has not been a great shift between the two sectors. That is important, as it helps produce stability.

Mr McGlone:

The sound quality here in the Senate is not brilliant. That is no disrespect to any of the departmental officials who are giving evidence. I have noticed that problem here before.

The Chairperson:

I mentioned that at the start of the meeting. I would be very grateful if people could try to speak clearly.

Mr McGlone:

Paragraph 3.23 refers to reception classes and states that they are of little beneficial effect in the development of youngsters. Paragraph 3.6 and figure 6 show that 606 children were still in reception places in 2008-09. Will you provide some detail on the target for completely removing reception places?

Mr Haire:

Schools have the right to admit children into reception classes. The issue for us is careful planning. We are keen to try to reduce the number of children in reception classes and to have appropriate provision. However, it is not always possible to achieve that in local area planning. For example, in the Belfast Board area, there are only three children in reception classes; in the Western Board area, there are 85; but in the Southern Board area, there are about 300. Therefore, the issue is around the structure and organisation of primary provision in an area and how that provision is developed. The total number of children in reception classes has already been reduced to about 550 in 2009-10, although we do not have the final statistics. Therefore, things are moving; we have only 20% of the reception places that we had before.

Many reception places are in quite large units; about half the children attending reception classes are in quite large classes, of 10 pupils or more. The general indicator is that the larger provision works well. The difficulty is when the parents of one or two children decide, as is their right, that they want their children in a primary school, so they put them into a reception class. There is a particular problem when a child is put into a reception class that shares a teacher with P1 and P2 pupils. In such cases, one teacher could be teaching three year groups. That is not good practice. Despite that, parents are choosing to go down that route. Often, parents are choosing to do that later in the school year, when their child has reached the age of four. That is a parental choice.

That is a difficult issue for us. If we were to look down from on high in Rathgael and say that parents must not put their children in reception classes, we could damage the provision in certain

areas. There are major issues with the situation in the Southern Board area. As we move forward we have to ask why there is not a continuing focus on that issue. I also want to know whether the larger reception classes should become nursery units and, if so, how will that work? Reducing the number of reception classes has been a continuous task. On the other hand, if we took a hammer to the issue and said, “Thou shalt not do that”, we could be depriving children and parents of choice.

Mr McGlone:

Is the issue of reception classes likely to create any potential problems for the single education body and its consistency of approach?

Mr Haire:

There are many areas on which, as we move forward, we will have to spend some time trying to get consistency in policy. That will take time. We will have to take account of the provision, the schools and the structures; it would be foolish not to take time to do that. Consistency is a key element. It is important that we get consistency in some policies so that they work effectively across the North.

Mr McGlone:

What is your conclusion on what the Department is doing about reception classes?

Mr Haire:

The Department is applying continuing pressure to try to reduce the number of reception classes, and it is trying to improve the quality of all provision in that area. The inspectorate has a strong focus on improvement in the area, and there is continuing work on the quality of education and on making it age-appropriate. Continuing work is being done through the PEAG process at a local level to work out the right provision.

The inspectorate keeps a focus on reception provision. Larger receptions are satisfactory; the weakness is in smaller areas. The general problem is with small schools. We tackled that issue in the sustainable schools strategy, in which we emphasised that strong views will have to be taken on the size of schools so that children in different years do not have to share the same teacher. That is a general process in all education policy.

Dr Davison:

One of the issues to do with the strategy that we have been exploring is the nature of the curriculum here. We are considering the period from preschool provision, which starts when a child is three years of age, until the end of Key Stage 1, when a child is seven or eight. We are exploring whether more emphasis should be put on a continuum of curriculum because, in the revised curriculum for primary school, we have emphasised play-based learning in years one and two, which is a natural development from what happens in the preschool year. There is currently a preschool curriculum and a revised foundation stage curriculum in which there is a Key Stage 1 offering.

The strategy considers whether a continuum in the curriculum should be emphasised much more strongly. With that emphasis, the age-appropriateness of the provision becomes important. If, in some circumstances, four-year-olds have to be in a certain place, let us make sure that they are getting an appropriate curriculum. That also applies to two-year-olds. The provision should be age-appropriate. Rather than seeing neat dividing lines in the curriculum, we should try to see a continuum, in which we set out exactly what we regard as age-appropriate provision.

Mr McGlone:

Is that a hypothetical approach, or is it already under way?

Dr Davison:

We have been exploring that approach as part of the strategy. In the revised curriculum, we have set out everything for Key Stage 1, Key Stage 2, Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. We have set out a preschool curriculum that all preschool centres, schools and classes have to follow. We currently have two pieces of work, but we must see the curriculum much more as a continuum, so another piece of work will be necessary to bring those together.

Mr McGlone:

I presume that the Department is ready for that piece of work. When will it be initiated, and what shape or form will it take?

Dr Davison:

We hope to bring the strategy to a conclusion soon. It has to be consulted on, and the Minister has to make decisions. We will take the work forward on the basis of the decisions that are made.

Mr Lunn:

Robson, you just mentioned two-year-olds. Figure 8 on page 26 of the report shows that over 17,000 two-year-olds have been through the programme since 1997, at a cost of over £10 million. However, the Department's own review appears to indicate that two-year-olds are too young to benefit from preschool provision, at least in its current format. Why have the needs of two-year-olds not been addressed appropriately?

Dr Davison:

We are not saying that the provision is inappropriate; we are saying that the provision could be set out much better if it were seen as a continuum. We are conscious of an issue with two-year-olds. There is no legal bar to two-year-olds being in nursery schools. The issue has arisen because there has been demographic decline in the age group for which nursery schools provide, and we still hold to the principle that nursery schools have to take three-year-olds first, so they fill up their places with children of that age.

In the past number of years, we faced the question of whether we should allow two-year-olds into nursery provision. If we did not, we would risk making nursery provision unviable and perhaps having to close down facilities. Over time, our emphasis has been on ensuring that the provision for two-year-olds in nursery schools is age-appropriate. Data from the inspectorate shows that nursery school provision, which covers two-year-olds, is universally regarded by the inspectorate as being of good quality.

We do not have any evidence from the inspectorate that two-year-olds in nursery schools are being given tasks that they ought not to be. In getting provision that is clearly identified by the inspectorate as good, we argue that the arrangements should be clarified right the way through; in other words, for two-year-olds up to six-year-olds, which falls within the nought to six strategy. We have to establish what the continuum of curricular provision looks like, so that wherever children are, teachers in nursery schools and staff in other settings can ensure that their provision is on the button.

Mr Haire:

We have examined the Sure Start curriculum, which covers two-year-olds, and the inspectorate will report to us on that in March. How the pilots have worked will allow us to determine the

age-appropriate nature of that curriculum and develop it. Our predecessors' general thinking when this work began in 1997 was that children's education should begin when they reach three years of age, and there was no consideration of it beginning at the age of two. In England, however, it was observed that a lot of really important development work could be done for two-year-olds in preschool. At the same time, our statutory nursery schools, which are largely focused in deprived areas, had that provision and began that work. We now take the view that we can do that, and it has great educational benefit, particularly for deprived communities.

We want to ensure that the quality of our nursery and Sure Start provision matches that in the rest of the United Kingdom. The question is one of age-appropriateness and of making sure that children are getting the right sort of play activities and are benefitting from those.

Mr Lunn:

Perhaps I am old-fashioned, but my mind boggles at the thought of putting a two-year-old into any form of education. I do not want to argue with experts, but I think that two-year-olds are too young; many are still wearing nappies. The idea seems to have come about as a result of the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. Was it deliberately left open so that two-year-olds could be provided for, or was that a mistake? The report states that in 2001, 2002 and 2004, the Department planned to correct what appeared to be an anomaly, and because of circumstances, "the opportunity was unavoidably lost." Which way is it? Do we consider it as beneficial to begin to educate children at such a tender age, or is it the result of an anomaly that should have been corrected long ago?

Mr Haire:

I will ask Dr Davison to talk about that.

The concept of the foundation stage and our revision of the curriculum are at the centre of one of our big debates. When we think of education, most of us have an image of a child sitting with a spelling book in the first week of school. It is a big issue for us. Since 1989, and somewhat unsuccessfully in the 90s, the Department has been arguing passionately that the early phases of education should be play-based and should allow children to explore and develop. In the revised curriculum, we are now making the point that from the ages of three to six, children's education should be play-based.

Our critics say that we are against literacy and numeracy, but we are passionate about those subjects. There are children who are reading at four years old, and we tell teaching professionals that it is up to them, as professionals, to decide whether a child is ready. However, we are trying to get the point across that there should be play from the age of two. It is important to make sure that it is the right form of play and that there are opportunities for it.

All the evidence from EPPNI and from various studies tells us that getting that right and making it available to every child is absolutely crucial to education. If we do not have that provision for two-year-olds in certain areas, those children will not experience it. In primary schools in some areas, there are children who appear to be two years behind others in their personal educational development. That is simply unacceptable. If we believe in equality of educational outcomes, we have to do something. That is exactly what our statutory schools and our provision for two-year-olds are aimed at. If you go to the providers that accept two-year-olds, it is clear that their processes are absolutely appropriate. It is about play, care, sorting out potty-training and whatever is appropriate. It is crucial that that is done and that it is done very well.

Mr Lunn:

What do other countries do? What examples have we from abroad? I get the impression from the Education Committee that other countries that have good academic performance do not start their children that early.

Dr Davison:

The situation varies country by country, but I understand that countries that start the schooling of children slightly later have a significant amount of preschool provision in place. They call it by different names. It comes down to what Will was saying: what is meant by “education” in this context?

To return to your original point, I do not know whether or not the provision made in the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 was an anomaly, but thinking has moved on a fair bit since then, and one of the contributors to that has been the experience with Sure Start over the past few years, particularly its capacity to influence the development of two-year-old children. If that is a good thing, and EPPNI suggests that the preschool experience, in the broadest sense, is very important for particular groups of children, the challenge for us is to ensure best practice and ensure that it is age-appropriate and delivers in the right way. However,

we have to stretch what we mean by “education”. When developing the strategy, we were more interested in the concept of development rather than seeing it purely as a question of education.

Mr Lunn:

Is there anything to stop private sector groups from bringing in two-year-olds?

Mr Haire:

Our contracts with the voluntary and community sector are only for children aged from three years. Younger children can attend, but the funding is only for children aged from three years. There are providers who have fee-paying places, but that is not for us to go into.

Mr Lunn:

Are the two-year-olds currently covered by the statutory provision still funded?

Dr Davison:

They are funded.

Mr Lunn:

If a parent with a two-year-old wanted to put that child into a voluntary playgroup, the child would not be funded and the parents would have to pay for it. I take the argument and I bow to your expertise about the desirability of introducing two-year-olds to play-based education or development. However, I cannot help thinking that getting a two-year-old into such a situation is a nice alternative to paying for a childminder or paying for children to go to a voluntary playgroup or crèche.

Mr Haire:

It has been shown by EPPNI and various studies that targeting that sort of provision to areas of social need where people have not had access to it can have a significant impact. A key theme in our early years strategy is about targeting paid provision to that particular group, because that group is otherwise unlikely to receive the benefit of such provision. A lot of our statutory provision for two-year-olds is located in deprived wards. However, the question is whether we can target it better.

Mr Lunn:

I take the point that if two-year-olds were stopped from using the facilities, it might threaten the future of some of the smaller units. I must say that that is a nice approach by government, and I certainly applaud you for that.

Mr Shannon:

My question is a wee bit of a follow-on from Trevor's question, in which he referred to the smaller units. I am very supportive of the idea of playgroup and preschool education, because having had three children go through that process, I can honestly vouch for the system. It helps them to develop, not just their character and their ability to make friends, but their reactions. I am aware of the good that comes from that system.

Appendix 1 of your report shows that all providers are required to have at least eight children in each group. Are there many providers operating at the threshold of eight? Is the Department satisfied that such providers can be viable and at the same time provide the required standard of preschool educational experience?

Dr Davison:

If inspections were to find cases of that ratio not being adhered to, the inspectorate would draw that to our attention. I am not conscious of the inspectorate drawing to our attention any individual cases of that happening, never mind it happening on any scale. If that is the ratio, that is what inspectors would look at when they are in the various settings or classes. We have no evidence suggesting that the ratio is not being adhered to.

Mr Haire:

Inspectors are emphasising that about 45% of provision in the voluntary community sector is good or very good, and other providers are rated as satisfactory. There are other areas in which we want to see some improvement, and I have described the process of how we encourage improvement and work with the sector, including Early Years, which is the major body in that sector, to help drive up standards in that process. We have seen a major leap in the standards that we have been able to achieve. We are achieving a balance in viability and improved standards.

Nevertheless, there is no complacency on our part. We want to keep on pushing those

standards up, and that is why the trend of our thinking is that it is necessary to work with the sector to increase its professionalisation, and, therefore, we accept that there is a funding issue that has to be looked at in that process. The funding of that is something that the Assembly is going to have to consider when working on in its priorities. The Department believes that that seriously needs to be taken into account when determining our direction of travel.

What I want to get across is that this is not a deficit model; great strengths have been achieved. The inspectorate is emphasising that although there are areas for improvement, this phase has developed well. The phase needs to develop further, but people should be assured that there is good quality work being done, and we have been able to work in partnership to achieve that.

Mr Shannon:

Dr Davison, are you aware of many units that are operating at the threshold of eight? I think that you may have said that you were not; did I catch you right?

Dr Davison:

Yes; I cannot give you hard and fast information on that. What I am saying is that our evidence from the inspectorate does not draw to our attention any difficulties around the ratio. The basis for having the different ratios relates to workforce issues and to the issue of qualifications. In the nursery end, we are dealing with trained teachers, whereas that is not the case in the voluntary private sector.

Mr Shannon:

As a result of your being here today, could you please check that out and reply back through the Chairman, so that he can make Committee members aware of that?

Mr Haire:

We will write to you on that.

Mr Shannon:

Appendix 3 of the report tells us that full-time attendance at preschool has no additional benefits compared with part-time attendance. The report says that, yet it also refers to high-quality preschooling being related to better intellectual and social behavioural development for children. Am I right in seeing that that as an almost “yes and no” approach? Yes it is better; no it is not. It

sounds a bit like a pantomime. I am sure that it is not.

Mr Haire:

Part-time attendance is a minimum of two and a half hours, full-time is up to four and a half hours.

Obviously, a key element of that is the school keeping children during lunchtime and for part of the afternoon. Mr Lunn made the point that we are talking about very young children, and we do not want to keep them in school for too long. All the evidence indicates that a child's daily development needs can be achieved in two and a half hours.

There are good reasons why people would like their children to spend more time in school. It fits into family structures and organisation of transport, and there is value in children eating together at lunch. It is clear from our EPPNI study and its English equivalent that the desired educational return can be achieved in two and a half hours.

Mr Shannon:

Your reply seems to indicate that you feel that there is a balance to be achieved. Do you feel that there is an appropriate balance between full-time and part-time attendance? Are you content that your goals are being achieved? If not, what changes are needed?

Mr Haire:

All the evidence indicates that parents want to have choice. There are parents and schools who want more full-time provision for the reasons that I have just given. That comes at a cost of about £3 million a year. Some providers offer morning sessions and afternoon sessions, but only half as many children can be accommodated in a full-time session. The costs of that have to be taken into account. In educational terms, the part-time provision answers the need. We have a mixed economy. We have to take a view on giving access to every child versus the amount of money that can be put into the sector, bearing educational priorities in mind.

Dr Davison:

The interesting findings from the EPPNI study, which was a substantial piece of research, emphasised the quality of the experiences that are provided for the children and dealt with the issue of providing places for two-year-olds or three-year-olds and the part-time/full-time issue. If

we are to continue to raise quality, that is where the gains will be.

Mr Beggs:

I want to go back to the issue of providing places for two-year-olds. Paragraph 3.13 of the Audit Office report really struck me; it concluded:

“many 2 year olds are not at a stage in development where they can benefit from the experiences”.

It goes on to say:

“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.”

It is saying that money spent on putting two-year-olds into a class with older children will have a negative result. Why are we doing that? Would it not be better to pay for the empty seat and get a better educational result? It is astonishing; we are spending money on mixed-age classes that are having a negative effect. Why are we doing that?

Dr Davison:

Further down that paragraph, the report states that evidence emerging from ETI suggests that the appropriateness of the programmes that are being offered to the two-year-olds means that they are not having a negative effect. As I said earlier, views on that issue are changing. Our emphasis is on ensuring that what is offered to the children is appropriate. If the quality and the experiences are good, there will not be a negative effect.

Mr Beggs:

Is the review saying that there are enough two-year-olds to warrant special classes? That will not be the case in every situation.

Dr Davison:

No; that is not where the report takes us. In the nursery classes, trained teachers and their assistants provide the experiences that the two-year-olds in the class require within a broad play-based curriculum. I am not an expert on the nature of the differentiation in that curriculum, but I am assured that that can and is being done.

Mr Beggs:

I will move on to a different area. Paragraph 3.22 of the report puts forward the view of an evaluation that shows that children who had attended preschool performed better than those who

had not. I am pleased that the scheme has had a generally positive effect on cognitive and behavioural outcomes. What research has been done to specifically measure the levels of attainment by the neediest children who attend preschool education? The scheme was brought in to help children who are in most need, who may not be as ripe and ready for education as others who may have greater parental assistance and more skills.

Dr Davison:

That is difficult territory. Measuring levels of attainment at that age is difficult, which is why, when we tussled with the issue in our work on the strategy, we tried to think about development rather than attainment, or even education in broad terms. The purpose of preschool is not to measure attainment but to help children to prepare, socially and developmentally, for their future education. Therefore, it is, in its own right, a phase of child development, but it also lays a basis — through the play-based curriculum — for children to move on to the next stage. The revised curriculum is our attempt to bridge the formal dimension of education with the very play-based, preschool provision, and that is why we are now trying to establish whether that can be codified as a continuum.

Mr Beggs:

Preschool is attended by 90% of children. Has the Department attempted to identify the 10% who do not attend? Is that 10% evenly spread in the community as a consequence of parental choice, or is non-attendance more prevalent in certain communities? Is non-attendance more prevalent in disadvantaged communities? What assessment has the Department made of who does not attend preschool and why?

Mr Haire:

We did some work in areas of deprivation, and I think that the NIAO report includes some statistical evidence that indicates that there may be a slower uptake but that, broadly, the issue is not too significant. The truth is that we do not know. We have no survey that is specific to that 10%. In fact, the figure is lower than 10%.

Mr Beggs:

Is that not a critical issue? Who are the 10% who are not attending?

Dr Davison:

As we said earlier, our evidence came at the front end in that we participated in the omnibus survey on five occasions to try to determine the demand for provision. That figure was consistently around 90%, which is why 90% became the target. As the figures indicate, we have now moved beyond 90%, but we have not surveyed who is not attending, and it would be difficult to do so.

Mr Beggs:

I ask you to exercise your minds to find a way to establish who is not attending. There is bound to be some method of tracing such children in each community. Who is attending will be known, and, from that — by using health records and so on — the number of children in different communities can be roughly ascertained.

Dr Davison:

We will certainly take that point away, but it is a very difficult issue to get at.

Mr Beggs:

OK. Now that 90% of preschool children are participating, have you been able to discern any universal improvement in provision at Key Stages 1 and 2 over the period of the programme?

Mr Haire:

The EPPNI study indicated improvement among participating children in comparison with children in a control group, and that makes us confident that this type of provision produces an improvement. That detailed study was conducted by Queen's University, Belfast, and Oxford University; they analysed the numbers, so that gives us assurance in the process. The study indicates that the further children progress through the stages, the more impact their experience in Key Stages 1 and 2 will have. Therefore, the impact of preschool becomes less relevant. There is strong international evidence that this sort of intervention has an impact. However, that must be continuously reinforced at all levels. Getting that right is only part of the building block of getting education right.

Dr Davison:

There is a big issue around the measurement of attainment. At the end of Key Stage 1, we rely entirely on teacher-based assessment. We have not considered adopting external assessment in

that area. To get objective data on which one could make judgements on the impact, one would need to have some measures of attainment at different stages on the path. That is a difficult road to tread.

Mr Beggs:

I am conscious of the lack of funded places in certain areas. For the past two years in a row, I have been contacted by parents in Carrickfergus who have been offered preschool places in Glengormley and Antrim, which are considerable distances away. Why does the money not follow the child and allow parents to place the child wherever they want? Why can parents not go to a voluntary or statutory provider and have their child accepted?

Mr Haire:

If that approach were taken, the size of schools and number of teachers would have to be regulated —

Mr Beggs:

Provided that they met all the statutory requirements.

Mr Haire:

That issue would have to be satisfied, and the PEAG system has worked carefully at local level to try to balance the competing needs. That is not to say that there are not issues to be continuously refined. The PEAG system is in place, and we want to ensure that the local market works correctly to meet parental need. One must be satisfied that the quality is there and that the providers are there. In the example that I gave of Craigavon, where expansion is required, there were no other providers, and the Department had to deal with that on a statutory basis. There will be short-term trends, but we want the PEAG system to pick up on issues and provide better matches in areas such as Carrickfergus.

Mr Beggs:

I have just illustrated that the system failed for two years in a row, so it is obviously not reacting quickly enough. Have you considered how the system can work with greater flexibility so that that does not happen again this year?

Mr Haire:

The Department has mechanisms in the centre. Funding is held at the centre. For example, when we find areas where demand is not being met, we can release funding. We have made between 60 and 100 new places available this year because we found areas in the Southern Board that needed those. I have not heard from the North-Eastern Board on that issue, and I do not know why the issues to which you referred have not been dealt with. Our system contains flexibility to meet need. It is sometimes difficult in some areas for parents. Understandably, they want to use a particular provision, and sometimes that is already full.

Mr Beggs:

I am talking about all the places in the Carrickfergus area being full for two years in a row.

Mr Haire:

The system was intended to meet those issues, and, clearly, we need to ensure that we continue to refine the system.

Mr Dallat:

My mind is wandering all over the place, and I cannot help recalling that we have been discussing this subject for 12 years. Mr Haire and Dr Davison, you played key roles when you worked for the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), when it first became generally known that the disparity between social classes was so wide and that illiteracy and innumeracy levels were at an all-time high. On the basis of the study that showed that, it was agreed by all that preschool education was the way forward.

Now that you are wearing the hats of the Department of Education and — if I am correct — depending on the inspectors, has the problem that has afflicted the community for so long really been solved in a radical way? Around 4,000 people are leaving school each year and adding to a problem that is becoming greater as employers ask for better skills and higher levels of education. I am not sure that I have got the thrust of what has been achieved.

Mr Haire:

Undoubtedly, early-years education is a key part. However, as I have emphasised, it is only one part of a process. We must improve the quality of education throughout the entire process, so that teenagers believe that they will be able to get qualifications and jobs, because that phase has

always been blighted by issues of aspiration. We must get primary education right, and, frankly, the key parts of literacy and numeracy must be cracked by age 11 to improve our post-primary phase, in which so many of our children are failing.

All the phases of education right through to the age of 20 must be considered. There is no magic bullet that will enable the whole system to work well if we get preschool education right. However, what we can see in the report is that there is strength in early-years education, a point that the inspectorate has made very strongly to the Department.

Northern Ireland was the most underprovided part of the UK in 1997 with respect to early-years education; only 45% of our children received preschool education. Other provision was being made through the community and voluntary sectors, and families and communities were using money and contributions to establish playgroups and so on. The Northern Ireland Pre-School Playgroup Association (NIPPA) also did a sterling job, as did Barnardo's and Save the Children, but that work was not being funded, and many of those organisations were living from hand to mouth. The Department then invested money in early-years provision and got the work going. That led to a major rise in standards right away, as the inspectorate has emphasised. The EPPNI study demonstrates that that has worked and that its impact can be seen on the educational system right through to children aged eight or nine.

You can be reassured that there is real strength in early-years education, but work must continue to improve in each phase of our educational system. It is not as good as it should be, and we must never be satisfied. We must particularly consider why any children are not reaching the development stage at the age of four.

The Department still has much to learn. Linda Wilson has recently undertaken the role of director of families and communities to address the connectedness of education with families, family aspiration and the community, which educationalists have identified as one of the key drivers in improving educational standards. Unless education can connect more effectively, the big issues will not change.

No country has a perfect solution to early-years education, and it will involve a great deal of hard work. The study and the NIAO have told the Department that its early-years strategy has been a useful development of policy. The next phase is coming, and in it the Department will be

focusing on children under six years of age, which, as I have told Trevor Lunn, represents a radical shift in policy. The Department has changed its view and has strengthened the whole concept of the play-based foundation stage that is early-years education to ensure that literacy and numeracy skills are improved and to impact on children who are not getting that experience from their family and community. The Department has a clear focus on that, and the inspectorate has told us that that is the right direction in which to go.

The policy is working, but there is a long hard drive ahead. The Department can see those changes happening, and it has a much higher aspiration as a result. However, the fact that 4,000 young people are leaving full-time education with literacy and numeracy skills that make it impossible for them to get jobs is totally unacceptable. We must reduce that number.

Mr Dallat:

I accept everything that you have said. However, why did the EPPNI study not go beyond Stage 1?

Dr Davison:

The EPPNI study was directly related to the preschool policy.

On a wider front, the years that I spent working in DEL reinforced the fact that if high enough levels of literacy and numeracy are not achieved by the end of compulsory education, the implications are lifelong. The work that the Department is trying to bring to a conclusion in the revised curriculum makes literacy and numeracy the core of early-years education. If a child completes 12 years of compulsory education, he or she ought to come out literate and numerate.

We have put in place a school improvement strategy called Every School a Good School. Its purpose is to ensure that children come out at the end of 12 years with the relevant and appropriate qualifications that are commensurate with their ability. If they do not do so, there ought to be consequences. We are also putting a literacy and numeracy strategy in place that will replace the strategy from 1998, and we are focusing tightly on how that can be developed.

There will also be a special educational needs (SEN) and inclusion policy because there are children who have barriers to education, which need to be tackled. Early-years education is a part of the broader task of raising the standards of literacy and numeracy across the education system.

Our part of the education system dovetails with the work that DEL has done in adult literacy and numeracy.

Mr Dallat:

I find that extremely useful. That links up what has been, or should have been, happening over the past 12 years. The work that was done initially by DEL was fundamental to establishing why we have so many problems in Northern Ireland relating to poor health, crime rates and other issues. I needed to ask those questions to get reassurance that the work will make a contribution, and I think that we should follow through on the research that was done.

Such research has been done in other countries, and there is firm evidence that, where programmes are sustained and measured, the results are positive. We can see education, not as a continuous argument about social deprivation, but as the absolute right of every child to get an education that is tailored to their individual needs. That is critical. Maybe it is impatience and old age that makes me think that it has taken a long time.

Ms Purvis:

Dr Davison spoke about Every School a Good School. To follow on from John's point, are you putting in place a longitudinal study to measure the outcomes of that strategy after the end of compulsory education?

Dr Davison:

Our assessment regime takes the end of the Key Stages as the main points at which we measure, so that is done at the end of Key Stages 1, 2 and 3, leading into GCSE. The Minister has set five GCSEs, including English and Maths, as the benchmark that we take as being the end of compulsory education. A process is in place by which the Department, the school support network and, more importantly, the schools are able to measure progress against the focus on literacy and numeracy. That is what we are going to measure at the end of each Key Stage.

Ms Purvis:

Mr Haire, in your opening remarks you stated that 52% of provision is statutory.

Mr Haire:

Sorry, I said that 52% of our nursery schools, which are probably the strongest part of our

education system, are in the 25% of most deprived wards.

Ms Purvis:

Do the most deprived wards tend to be in urban areas?

Mr Haire:

Yes, they mostly are.

Ms Purvis:

Does that mean that the other 75% of deprived wards have community and voluntary provision?

Mr Haire:

No, sorry; the nursery provision is heavily concentrated in that area, but there are also nursery units in many primary schools. There is a much higher uptake of free school meals in statutory nursery schools and nursery units. That is another indicator. Voluntary and community nurseries have a 10% uptake of free school meals. That indicates that, overall, there are more free school meals in less-deprived areas. However, there are many voluntary and community groups in Ms Purvis's constituency, such as the Ballybeen Women's Centre, that are doing excellent work in that area and are producing fantastic results. Therefore, we must be careful.

Ms Purvis:

Paragraph 3.30 indicates that the workforce is the single most important factor that influences the quality of the preschool services, and you mentioned that in your opening remarks. What action have you taken to ensure that continuous professional development opportunities are provided for all staff in preschool provision?

Mr Haire:

I will speak briefly, and Robson will respond thereafter. It is interesting; we have the statutory sector, which has its process, using the Curriculum Advisory and Support Services (CASS) system, and the rest of the boards will stand behind the teaching profession. We work with NIPPA, which is now known as Early Years. In light of its views on the sector and on how it could develop, and, as I said, because many of its staff had lower qualification levels, we appointed early-years specialists. NIPPA has 26 of those specialists, and other specialists work in other parts of the voluntary and community sector. Those people have real experience and

knowledge in that area, and they work alongside the voluntary and community sector to help it to improve its quality.

That partnership process has been agreed with the voluntary and community sector to help it to build up its expertise with specialists who support the 300-odd voluntary and community sector workers. During the next phase of the process, we must take our thinking on early-years education further, because all the evidence indicates that we should continue to develop professional skills and qualifications in the voluntary and community sector to raise them to the levels found in the statutory sector. That process must be conducted carefully, because there are many excellent staff in that sector. We must work with those people and determine how to strengthen the support base.

Dr Davison:

We have been exploring that matter through the work of the strategy. It is not complete yet and not ready to go to consultation. However, the starting point is the notion that we must focus on trying to increase the quality of preschool provision. There are three real dimensions to the strategy.

The first dimension concerns the initial qualifications. Fully trained teachers are the providers in nursery schools or nursery classes in a primary school. That is not the case in the voluntary sector or the private sector. That does not in any way diminish the qualifications in the voluntary and private sectors; I am simply saying that there is a gap. We must think carefully about that gap between the entry requirements for teachers and non-teachers among nursery providers. During our discussions, we cannot rush to the conclusion that all providers must be trained teachers. However, we can start to determine the direction in which we want to improve the overall qualifications.

The second dimension is about increasing and improving the range of continuous professional development (CPD) that is available to the preschool end of the business. The third dimension concerns the point about equity; that continuous professional development should be accessible to the whole sector, not only to the statutory part of the sector. Those are the areas that we have been exploring during our work on the strategy, which is a crucial piece in the push on quality.

Ms Purvis:

The report makes a recommendation about a professional development framework for CPD.

Are you working to try to implement that?

Dr Davison:

Yes. I talked about the nature of the curricular continuum earlier, and there is a piece of work on that that will give us a clear picture of CPD. We are also exploring the notion of milestones of development rather than attainment per se so that everyone understands what the development of a three- or four-year-old should be. Professional development can be added to that, meaning that we are sharing best practice on how to attain those milestones and how to deliver appropriate experiences to children at various ages. In other words, we are trying to build quality into the system in a much more systematic way by making it more accessible to statutory and non-statutory sectors than it is at present.

Ms Purvis:

The chief inspector's report found weaknesses in the quality of the professional support that is given to voluntary and private providers, and that is another element that affects the quality of provision. Will, you said that the organisation formerly known as NIPPA has 26 early-years specialists. If we consider the specialist provision and professional support that are given to the statutory sector, what is the Department doing to address the weaknesses in those areas in the voluntary and private sector?

Mr Haire:

The statutory sector receives the main provision, but we have given lots of support to Early Years. That organisation has been good at developing areas of support, and it strongly backs the statutory sector. However, Robson made the point that we recognise that in our consultation on the issue in the next phase, we must define exactly what we want for the voluntary and community sector and then ensure that the resources are available to build up capacity.

We are also trying to address another issue that is slightly separate but very important. We put out a special educational needs and inclusion strategy, one of the key areas of which was considering how to deal with special educational needs. Once again, provision for that area is stronger in the statutory sector. Education and library boards are giving the statutory sector more

access, but they are not giving the provision that we want to the voluntary and community sector. We want the voluntary and community sector to be given the same level of support as the statutory sector in developing SEN capabilities and capacities so that it can identify and support children with learning needs. The sector also needs resources to build its professional capacity so that it is able to do that work more effectively. The strategy, which is out for consultation at the moment, will assess whether we will have the resources to push into that crucial area. We hope that we will.

Ms Purvis:

I have a couple more questions, but I will ask those at the end of the meeting; I am conscious that other members are waiting to ask questions.

Mr Donaldson:

I wish to follow up on Dawn's point about continuous professional development in the private sector. The private sector makes up one third of preschool provision. Appendix 1 in the report states that at least half the staff in the private and voluntary sector hold a relevant qualification in either education or childcare; that is the minimum requirement for that sector. It has been several years since the number of children in the voluntary and private sector reached its peak. That figure has now levelled out. Is that minimum qualification standard pitched a bit too low? I appreciate what Robson said about advancing professional development, but does the minimum standard need to be raised a bit higher?

Dr Davison:

We have been considering that in our work on the strategy. The question is whether there should be trained teachers or whether staff working in the voluntary and community sector should just meet the minimum qualifications as set out in appendix 1. One option is to rush to an all-graduate profession, but we are not sure whether that is a sensible move. Another option is to set out a direction of travel. Having got to this point after 10 or 12 years, we now want to steadily start developing the entry qualifications for recruits to the voluntary and community sector. I think that setting out a direction of travel would be better than changing the system all in one go. However, that is a matter for the Minister to decide.

Mr Donaldson:

We have, for example, a number of people with a post-graduate certificate in education (PGCE)

who cannot get a primary school placement. I am not suggesting that working in the voluntary and private sector is a long-term solution for them, but there is something to be said for looking at whether that sector could make better use of those people while allowing them to gain experience in working with young children.

The birth rate can mean that there are years when there is a slight underprovision in places. For example, last year in central Lisburn, which is in my constituency, a number of parents were unable to get a placement for their children either in the voluntary/private or statutory sector. To what extent are you factoring preschools into your area-based planning, which, of course, goes to the heart of the Department's policy?

Mr Haire:

The PEAG system is an early phase of that process. Although we all recognise that we have to learn much more and make better use of data, I can point to many areas in which the PEAG groups have worked well and in which we have learned a lot. Therefore, that system is crucial to the process. We can expect post-primary children to travel further, but you want the parents of primary and preschool children to be able to walk to the school. Accessibility is a key consideration, so the planning has to be right. However, demographic swings can make that very difficult. Over one or two years, there might be a new housing development, with the result that lots of children come into an area, so planning is not an exact science, and we readily admit that pressure points exist.

Mr Donaldson:

How proactive is planning now? One gets the sense that in local areas, the PEAGs process played a very important role and generally did a good job in rolling out the expansion of preschool education. However, we have reached the stage where demographics are changing at primary and post-primary levels. I am not sure that I have a sense of the extent to which the PEAGs process looks at that matter proactively. Is it a case of waiting to look at intakes to try to smooth out an overprovision here and an underprovision there? I wonder whether there is a basis for being more proactive in area-based planning.

Mr Haire:

The Department feels that, in general, we have to be much more proactive and on the ball in thinking our way through all our provision. Frankly, a lot of our problems have arisen because

we have not been active enough in that area. Looking back, the signs existed for many years, and we suffered as a result of missing them. We readily put our hands up to that, which is why we put so much emphasis on the fact that the issue must be grasped.

Dr Davison:

The problem is wider than being just about planning, although that is a key point. Even if we are thinking of developing the workforce, should we be thinking of establishing and disseminating best practice on an area basis? In other words, should all providers in a particular area share best practice, rather than try to achieve it individually or on a fully regional basis? Therefore, there is potential in having an area-based approach to development as well as to planning.

Mr McLaughlin:

This matter has come up several times. Dr Davison indicated that there are difficulties in tracking demographic variations. Does the Department have its own statisticians? Do you work with the General Register Office and NISRA? I am sure that you have some kind of programme development process, but I am interested in the fact that there is a difficulty in tracking and projecting demographic changes that affect the overall quality of provision.

Mr Haire:

Yes, we have statisticians who are very much involved in policy planning. It is a big consideration for the education and library boards and, when it is established, for the education and skills authority. Policy planning is not just a case of working with the classic statistics that one gets from the census and other materials; it is about working with local knowledge and ensuring that we have really detailed knowledge.

Mr McLaughlin:

I am more interested in the new data sharing protocols that are emerging. Local knowledge is an essential requirement, but in my opinion, it tends to be retrospective. I am talking about planning ahead and developing strategic policies. The Education and Training Inspectorate report has been valuable, and you should take some satisfaction from the fact that the report that we are discussing today is far from being the most critical report that the Committee has had to deal with. Nevertheless, it has pointed out weaknesses and areas for improvement in a programme that has been in delivery for 10 or 12 years. I am trying to get to the nub of how far you are planning ahead.

Mr Haire:

We have had a problem with the extent to which council data enable us to plan ahead. Some of those data are not available in census terms, and, therefore, as Jeffrey mentioned, they do not give any early indications or enable us to make a detailed plan. We have often had to use the data for year 1 primary school intakes as a proxy for what is happening across the population. Statisticians recognise that we do not have all the data, and we must try to get a better hold on the flows of population.

Mr McLaughlin:

Surely you should be able to get a much earlier indication nowadays.

Mr Haire:

Data are an issue for the statisticians, who have emphasised that there is no easy answer. However, we need to get a better understanding.

Mr McLaughlin:

Can you give an assurance that people are looking at that? I would like you to come back to the Committee with some indication that that is being factored into your forward planning.

Mr Haire:

We recognise that we must address area planning and get a better focus in our provision. We must improve the flexibility of the process and learn from the experiences of Carrickfergus and other places. Money is generally held back through our funding mechanisms, and we in the Department work to try to flex the system as much as possible. It is important that we meet parental choice as far as we can by giving them the provision that they need as close to them as possible.

Mr McLaughlin:

Paragraphs 3.37 and 3.38 refer to children with special educational needs. There is a limit to the extent to which those needs can be projected. However, the Education and Training Inspectorate report and other inspectors' reports have produced fairly robust evidence that there has been limited improvement over the period of the programme.

Early intervention can have a significantly beneficial impact on young people's lives, not only in educational attainment but on society generally. If problems are not anticipated and responded to at an early stage, it will cost more to pay for them later. Can you give some indication of what has been done to improve provision, as opposed to performance, over the lifetime of the programme? What is your strategy for giving children with special educational needs access to high-quality preschool provision?

Mr Haire:

I will ask Robson to respond to those questions. You are right that provision for children with special educational needs is a core issue. That is particularly the case given that we can now identify young people's learning needs earlier. For example, it is crucial that, along with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, we meet speech and language needs as quickly as possible.

Mr McLaughlin:

That should be done in accordance with a stated process.

Mr Haire:

We are working on two areas. First, the inspectorate has just completed some work for us. Robson may be able to give you some sense of what is happening with some of the issues and to discuss whether there has been any improvement. The second area is the review of special educational needs and inclusion, which has gone out to consultation. One of that review's key aims is to find a way to get the balance right. We readily admit that our system worked better for the statutory sector than it has for the voluntary and community sector, and that is not right.

Dr Davison:

Mr McLaughlin, your comments reflect the chief inspector's concerns about special educational needs in the preschool sector. We asked the inspectorate to do a specific piece of work on that. The inspectorate reported back before Christmas and told us that although the vast bulk of the provision in the statutory sector is good and that the sector has the necessary processes in place, the same cannot be said for the voluntary and community sector. That is the point that you are making.

Mr McLaughlin:

Did the report make any recommendations?

Dr Davison:

In the consideration of our strategy work for those aged nought-to-six, we are talking about universal, not just statutory, access. That is to make sure that the revised code of practice that we have put forward in our proposals for SEN will apply across statutory and non-statutory provision. It is also to make sure that the degree of support and the building up of the capacity of teachers and other players will apply across statutory and non-statutory provision.

Our strategy is to try to equalise the processes, the approaches and the training that go into the non-statutory and the statutory sectors. Part of that is already public through the consultation on the SEN inclusion review, and, hopefully, part of it will come through in the consultation on the strategy for early years. The purpose is to level the playing field.

Mr McLaughlin:

I am aware of the consultation. Is the early-years strategy public? Can it be shared with the Committee?

Dr Davison:

No; it is not complete. As I said, the work on SEN is out for consultation.

Mr McLaughlin:

Are we talking about the same report? I am talking about the inspectorate's report, which may be of some help to the Committee.

Dr Davison:

It may be published. We will try to send it to the Committee.

Mr McLaughlin:

I take some reassurance from what you have told me. You have clearly accepted that there is a need for action. My main question asked how you would close the gap between SEN provision in the statutory sector and that in the voluntary and community sector. The fact that you have taken an approach that says that provision will be universal is hugely reassuring and is the single most

effective response. Does the report address some of the detail, such as the gender gap in the experience of SEN, that becomes apparent when one is drawn into the problem?

Dr Davison:

I cannot give you a specific answer. I do not think that the report addresses the issue in that degree of detail.

Mr McLaughlin:

We boys are at a particular disadvantage, and something needs to be done about that urgently.

Dr Davison:

That is certainly apparent when you look at the numeracy and literacy figures. *[Laughter.]*

Mr McLaughlin:

Do not go too far.

Ms Purvis:

Without being too general, have you found any variation in the accessibility and quality of provision in urban and rural areas? Are you working with the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) on provision in rural areas?

Mr Haire:

We had a meeting this morning and were talking to DARD officials about education and rural policy. Therefore, I know that that is an issue that we have discussed with DARD. We have also spoken to representatives from rural networks about that issue.

I am not aware of anything that tells us that there is a significant difference in provision. However, if there is any such information, I will get back to the Committee. For example, there are different travel patterns and so forth. One of the issues that we talk about, especially in regard to small rural hamlets, is that the voluntary and community sector has an ability to create small units to meet local need. That is important.

Dr Davison:

Are you talking about the quality of the provision?

Ms Purvis:

Yes.

Dr Davison:

That is an interesting question to which I cannot give a direct answer. I suspect that the pattern is the same as that in the school end of the business, where there are good, middling and bad schools in both urban and rural settings. However, generally, in urban settings there are more challenges and slightly lower outcomes than in the rural settings. However, I do not have evidence for preschools that will support that; we have not drilled into the inspectorate's evidence in that detail.

Ms Purvis:

Where does the nought-to-six strategy sit at present?

Dr Davison:

Officials are still trying to bring that strategy to a conclusion. It is a major piece of work, with many issues involved, such as those that we have tried to discuss with you. We must ask how far we are discussing education. If we are not talking about education, what are we discussing? Do you see the nought-to-two and three-to-six age groups in the same way, or should they each be viewed distinctly? It has taken a long time to work through even the high-level thinking that is involved before considering the detail of what to do with two-year-olds, four-year-olds and so on.

Ms Purvis:

Is that a case of learning and development?

Mr Haire:

The Committee's report on this session will come at a very appropriate time. The consultation will be brought forward, and the Department is looking closely at changes.

Mr Beggs:

You expressed a desire to drive up the educational standards of those who are involved in delivering the service in the voluntary and community sector. I know of people with third-level qualifications who work in that sector. If you are to achieve that, is it not essential to provide

funding so that you can afford to pay staff? Bearing that in mind, why was the funding allocation for each pupil in the voluntary and community sector in 2008-09 £1,445, but in a nursery class for each part-time pupil it was £1,760, and in nursery school it was £1,878 for each part-time pupil? Why does the funding vary depending on where the child goes?

Mr Haire:

Overhead costs vary, and there are different management and structural issues in some of those areas. However, that came from work on costing that was done in 1997 that used an English comparator and looked at how it was done there.

The early-years strategy is right to consider whether funding should be changed. The strategy has to look at the economics of running each unit and work out how to fund it. Our impression of what happened in England was that more money was provided for the voluntary and community sector by cutting some out of the nursery schools. Sustainability problems in the nursery schools are now being faced because the economics of the schools were not considered. From a quick reading, my impression is that economics were not considered, a cut was made and the sector has now destabilised. I take your point and that of Jeffrey Donaldson that there are people in the sector with higher-level education. If we are going to examine funding and make sure that everyone is taken account of, we have to get that right. The funding relates to it; we do not doubt that. However, we are trying to sustain 700 different organisations, to get the money right and to take into account the different costs that some of them have. In my experience, and as Robson said, you have to move carefully in that direction. A rapid shift could mean that half the system will go into debt, which the Assembly would have to cover anyway. Therefore, the economics must be dealt with carefully.

Mr Beggs:

Many groups in the voluntary and community sector achieve high inspection reports and are deemed to be very satisfactory. If they can deliver at lower costs, why would the Department expand the nursery sector rather than a sector that could be expanded more efficiently?

Mr Haire:

We are not expanding the nursery sector. I am sorry —

Mr Beggs:

You did so a number of years ago.

Mr Haire:

It was expanded some time ago. At present, it is stabilised, and we foresee no increase.

Mr Beggs:

Many years ago, my kids went to the Hansel and Gretel preschool playgroup in Glynn. At one stage, years after they left, the group was threatened with closure because a minimum number of children was needed in a playgroup's immediate preschool year.

The Hansel and Gretel playgroup had recently received a glowing inspection report. However, someone came to it and said that it had two weeks to get two kids or all its funding would be removed. It was not just the money for each child that would have been taken away; all of it would have been taken. The group, which had established training programmes, pulled together the community and gathered a good core of parents together, would have closed. I do not know how the playgroup did it, but within two weeks it found two children who met the criteria, and it stayed open. A year later, the group was operating at its capacity, and it even had waiting lists.

I was struck by what was a lack of planning in a rural community. That unit might have closed when a stream of children was potentially coming down the line. I could have understood all the funding being removed if the group had received substandard inspection report. Why had the Department no cognisance of the quality of the education that is provided? Was closure faced purely on the basis of the number of children who were enrolled?

Mr Haire:

I do not know of that specific case. That type of scenario is what the PEAGs system deals with. Obviously, I would need to find out about that particular case. Our issue is to achieve sustainability over time. The inspection reports are available to everybody. At this stage, I cannot comment on that individual case, but I will come back to you about it.

Mr Beggs:

Bear in mind that, had the unit closed, many people would not have had transport to take the kids

to the nearest urban playgroups. Glynn is a rural village, and the opportunity to have local preschool education would have been cut off for many of its residents.

Dr Davison:

On a general note, we are now much more conscious about the importance of quality in achieving sustainability. When the Minister issued the sustainable schools policy, quality was a key criterion. That must be a factor in preschool, as well as in infant school, provision.

Mr Beggs:

I understand that there is still a minimum roll requirement in rural areas and that if a group does not hit that number, regardless of the quality of its provision, it does not get funding.

Dr Davison:

Again, I cannot give you the specifics, but I will certainly look at that. The other point is that, as discussed earlier, area-based planning provides an opportunity to look at this issue more actively than, perhaps, passively.

Mr Beggs:

I should add that that I very much valued the opportunity that the voluntary and community sector afforded to my children. Their experience was great, and the chance for parents to participate and for the community to raise funds pulled everything together. The experience was very worthwhile.

Mr Haire:

We have talked about the difference in standards. We are fortunate to have had a very strong voluntary and community sector. We talk about differences, but let us also remember the really strong quality and the great developments that have emerged in that sector and that everyone here is emphasising.

Mr Dallat:

It would be an absolute disaster if Hansel and Gretel closed down. During the summer, I went for a break to a quiet place in Italy, where 10,000 parents and children arrived for a Hansel and Gretel festival. *[Laughter.]*

A lot of emphasis is put on the inspectorate delivery of the information. I cannot help digging up the past when, in effect, the inspectorate was the very organisation that did not deliver the information. It was not screaming from the rooftops. Is that organisation sufficiently reformed to have the independence, freedom and passion that are needed to highlight the huge differences that exist between children and the need to work towards something better, as has happened in other countries?

Mr Haire:

I cannot talk about previous issues. The inspectorate is giving us clear messages. For example, Stanley Goudie's previous inspectorate report was excellent. It did not make me comfortable because, quite rightly, you cannot make —

Mr Dallat:

I am glad to hear that.

Mr Haire:

I do not think that it should make anyone in the education sector comfortable. Great things are happening in our education sector; for example, we have great teachers, great schools and provision — we should not dig ourselves into a hole on that issue. However, none of us can be satisfied with educational outcomes if any child is not fulfilling his or her potential. The report makes that very clear to all of us who are in the system, from Assembly Members through to teachers. As someone with responsibility to ensure that the inspectorate is independent, I think that that is crucial. We are fortunate to have an inspectorate that is independent and that has that voice. However, in our thinking, what the inspectorate tells us is also very powerful. Robson, Linda and I cannot go into the classrooms, but the inspectorate can go into the classrooms or the playgroups and tell us what is and what is not working. It plans its work, and it gives us the evidence. It challenges our work, and that is powerful.

Mr Dallat:

I hope that the 52 members of the inspectorate get a copy of this report and put it in their big black briefcases and read it frequently.

The Chairperson:

There are no further questions. The early years are an important part of a child's development.

The Department must be congratulated on meeting its target with the majority of children that require a place. Lessons will be learned from today's meeting and will go into a report. We will be in contact with the Department about any correspondence.

Mr Haire, I know that this is your last appearance before the Public Accounts Committee wearing your education hat. However, you may come before us wearing another hat. I wish you well in your new post. Thank you very much.