



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**COMMITTEE
FOR EDUCATION**

OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)

**Early Years Provision, Early Years
Strategy and Pre-School Education
Expansion Programme**

15 June 2011

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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and Pre-School Education Expansion Programme**

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr David McNarry (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Phil Flanagan
Mr Trevor Lunn
Mr Conall McDevitt
Miss Michelle McIlveen

Witnesses:

Mr John McGrath) Department of Education
Ms Linda Wilson)

The Deputy Chairperson:

I welcome Linda Wilson and John McGrath. I ask you to make your presentation.

Mr John McGrath (Department of Education):

I will ask Linda to lead off.

Ms Linda Wilson (Department of Education):

Thank you very much. It is well known that there is a range of compelling evidence that indicates that the early years of a child's life have a powerful influence on the rest of his or her

life. Recent evidence shows that 15-year-olds who had attended pre-primary education tended to perform better than those who had not. At system level, countries with a higher proportion of pupils who had attended pre-primary education tended to perform better than countries with a lower proportion.

The 'Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland' (EPPNI) report that was published in 2006 provided evidence that high-quality preschool education makes a difference to the cognitive and social behavioural development of children and has lasting benefits that can still be discerned at the end of Key Stage 1. Indeed, the EPPNI report that was published in October 2010 considered a preschool experience in Key Stage 2 performance in English and maths. It confirmed that there is clear evidence that preschool effects persist to the end of Key Stage 2 for children who attended a nursery school class or playgroup. The research demonstrated that high-quality preschool education not only improves children's ability at the start of school but can also improve their capacity for learning in subsequent years.

The pre-school education expansion programme was introduced in 1998. It aims to provide one year of high quality funded preschool education for every child whose parents wish to avail themselves of it. In 2010-11, around 22,500 children were involved; around 14,500 in nursery and 7,500 in voluntary and private provision. In 2011-12, the budget for places in the voluntary and private sector is £14.1 million. Well over 90% of parents take up a place.

We work closely with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS), the Health and Social Care Board and the trusts to sustain and develop Sure Start provision. It is targeted at the 20% most disadvantaged wards and super output areas. It is designed to ensure that, in those areas, children get a good start in life from birth until the age of four. There are 34 Sure Start partnerships, which provide services to around 34,000 children and families.

In recognition of research findings that preschool children from disadvantaged backgrounds could benefit from more than one year of quality preschool education provision, the Department of Education (DE) commissioned the development of a programme for children who are two to three years old. In September 2007, that was introduced as a pilot within Sure Start. It offers a group-based, play-focused learning opportunity for young children. It also involves parents as an integral part of the programme. At present, the programme involves around 1,700 children. It recently received a positive evaluation from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). Sure Start's overall budget for 2011-12 is approximately £24 million.

Following the end of consultation on the draft early years strategy on 31 January, the Department received around 2,000 responses, which indicates a high level of interest. The Department is currently processing and analysing the responses to the consultation and will work with the new Minister on the way forward. I was also asked to address the realignment of functions with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. In November 2006, responsibility for early years policy, childminding, day care and the home childcare scheme was transferred from DE to DHSSPS by direct rule Ministers in order to align them with developments in England. At the time, there were a number of concerns about the proposal, particularly about the separation of legislative and policy responsibility in that a policy that is owned by one Department would be legislated on by another. Furthermore, regional and social structures for delivery of education, health and social care here are different to those of England,

where the former Department for Education and Skills had a broader remit than DE and where local councils have a key role in delivery of those services.

The transfer was carried out in November 2006. It has created difficulties for DE, DHSSPS and their associated bodies, particularly in the areas of childminding, day care and home-based childcare.

Although some elements of the transfer have developed well, such as the development of Sure Start, others have been less successful, leaving both Departments carrying a high degree of risk. That is particularly so for DHSSPS, which was exposed to the risk of failing to meet its statutory duties due to the ongoing operational difficulties in implementing another Department's policy. Caitríona Ruane and Michael McGimpsey agreed that, although DE would retain responsibility for Sure Start, the early years fund and the core funding of the early years organisation, other policy responsibilities should be realigned to DHSSPS. That took effect in April 2011, and it ensures clearer legislative protection and removes inherent risks from both Ministers and Departments.

Finally, the current position for preschool places this year is still unclear. We continue to work with the boards to ensure that as many children are placed as possible, but the final position is not yet known. One positive step this year was the introduction of a two-stage process that enables parents of those children who were not placed in the first stage to state further preferences and to delay the consideration of two-year-olds. There has been much debate on the issue, particularly about nursery schools and statutory provision. However, the Department's policy does not guarantee a particular setting.

I will conclude with that. Thank you.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Do you have anything to add to that, John?

Mr McGrath:

No. That is fine, Chair.

Mrs Dobson:

Thank you for that, Linda. Reading through the text of the pre-school education expansion programme, you could be forgiven for thinking that there is not a problem with preschool education. However, given the number of constituents who contact me daily about the issue, I know that there definitely is a problem.

I admire the aim of the programme, which is:

“To provide a funded pre-school place for every child”.

However, the ‘Belfast Telegraph’ reported in April that 1,493 children had failed to secure a funded place. That would appear to be the equivalent of almost 10% of the total statutory places available. Are those figures correct?

Ms L Wilson:

I am not immediately familiar with the figure of 1,493. However, there were a number of parents, who, at the end of the first stage, chose not to proceed with the process, and, according to

our records, that figure was roughly 700. Those parents were asked to state a further preference for their children, they chose not to do so and they were not taken into stage 2 of the process. Therefore, we have that cohort of parents, but we may have to go back and see if we can track the others.

Mrs Dobson:

Where did the 'Belfast Telegraph' get that information?

Ms L Wilson:

We think that it may have come from the education and library boards. We have written to the boards to ask them for a breakdown of the figures that they provided to the press. From some of the information that we saw, those figures included parents who did not go forward into stage 2. They also included some late applications, in other words, applications that arrived in April, May or June.

Mrs Dobson:

Will you provide the Committee with accurate figures of how many children still do not have a place?

Ms L Wilson:

We can provide you with the information that the boards give us, and we are happy to do so.

Mrs Dobson:

I recognise that the Department's criteria give priority to children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Do you agree that those children who are currently being denied a statutory nursery place are being socially and educationally disadvantaged by those criteria?

Ms L Wilson:

We are not denying a child a place as such, and we are doing our best to place children whose parents wish them to be placed and can find settings that they wish to avail themselves of. We have a policy that aims to place over 90% of children, and that is what we work towards.

Mrs Dobson:

The children who do not fit into the Department's criteria are being socially and educationally disadvantaged; that must be addressed.

Ms L Wilson:

We need to look at the criteria.

Mr McGrath:

The point is that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds need as much help as possible in respect of overall educational achievement. All the evidence points to that. Some children's life chances are affected before they even come into the system, and that is well known. Ideally, you would want everyone to get a place. Within that, if there is some gap between supply and demand, the Department's policy and standard agenda is to focus on those who come from a socially disadvantaged background. Many of those people miss lots of things from life that other children from a better background take for granted. Ideally, we want everyone to have a place.

Between 1,400 and 1,500 children were unplaced after the first round; 781 decided to go further; and some 700 did not. If they did not participate in the process in the second stage, it is very difficult to make a determination on what has happened to them. However, they did not stay in the process, and that is outside our gift.

Mrs Dobson:

The reasons why they felt they had to opt out of the process need to be addressed. Did they just give up?

Mr McGrath:

There was a two-stage process. A number of people did not make it the first time round. They were offered the chance to avail themselves of another opportunity, and some 700 did not.

Mrs Dobson:

A lot of children in my constituency were offered places miles and miles away, which was totally out of reasonable range.

Mr McGrath:

I can understand that. The only point that I am making is that it would be best if everyone had stayed in the process. If they had, we would see the net outcome instead of a mix between 700 who disappeared and 100 or so who went through the process and still did not get placed. It is grey, and some of the reporting on this has veered from black to white.

Mr McDevitt:

On that point, what steps did the Department take to try to understand why 700 people dropped out of the process? Was any attempt made to try to engage with those people to understand why 50% of the first cohort disappeared off the radar?

Ms L Wilson:

The process is managed through partnerships on the ground through the boards and the preschool educational advisory groups (PEAGs), so we rely very heavily on them to look after the operational side. We only became aware recently that 700-odd people did not remain in the process.

Mr McDevitt:

I guess that this is part of the issue. You own the policy, and I understand that it is managed by the boards. You have come here to tell us that one of the problems with evaluating the policy is that 700 people dropped out and are, therefore, in limbo, if you pardon the potential inappropriateness of that expression. You are telling me that you do not know why and that you only knew recently that they were there. Therefore, it seems to that there are a number of system failures in play at a basic quality control level that lead to you being in a position in which you are not able to form a strong view on whether the policy is effective. You do not know, and you have not tried to find out.

Mr McGrath:

The process has just finished. It was the first time that we introduced a two-stage process to try to improve upon it. Clearly, we need to look at it again. I want to draw a distinction: we are looking at the process here, rather than the policy. The policy is to provide as many places for

those who want them. The process has just finished. This is a difficult area in which to try to match supply and demand, not only in broad numbers, but in geographical terms. The Minister has said that he will review the operation of the procedures, and we will be doing that to see the lessons that are to be learned. There are unfilled places in the system. There is a sense, therefore, that we have areas where children cannot get places and others where there are places and no demand. We have to get a better match for that in terms of public funding. I am sure that the Committee would support that. We will be looking at the operational process and looking at whether we can refine it further.

Mr Craig:

John, I want to speak to you on that subject. When I went to the South Eastern Education and Library Board, I was told that there was overprovision in Lagan Valley. I was told that despite the fact that over 100 people could not get a place. The two do not match up.

When I drilled further into it, I found that there are 45 excess spaces in the Twinbrook/Poleglass area, yet, in other areas, there is undersupply and underprovision. There is massive underprovision in the sector in Jo-Anne's area.

You can sit there and tell me that it is difficult to do. But it is not particularly difficult, because there is a load of statistics on birth rates, where births have occurred and potential demand. Why is that not looked at two or three years prior? The potential demand should reflect the potential supply, but that is clearly not happening in the system.

Mr McGrath:

I did not say that we were not going to look at it, Jonathan; we will look at it. I agree that if there is a mismatch, if there are public resources available but they are in the wrong place, that is not appropriate and it is not a good answer, so we will be looking at it. We have made the point that it is not the easiest thing to do, because the statistics are for all children, but that does not automatically mean that every parent wants their children to have places. At one level, you have to wait for the demand to evidence itself through people applying, which is not unreasonable. However, we will be looking at it, because, as the Committee knows, resources are getting much tighter.

We have put additional funding into this, so we will want to make sure that it is not funding empty places, in Poleglass or wherever, and failing to fund need in the rest of Lagan Valley. The Minister is quite keen that we, first, make sure that we get the best use of the resources that we have, and, secondly, check whether we need to provide additional funding, which clearly has a high cost in the current resourcing. We will be looking at that.

Mr Craig:

I am glad to hear that you will look at those issues, because, quite frankly, it is a waste of public funds to have that sort of scenario.

Mr McGrath:

Absolutely, that is the issue. It is not necessarily a funding issue; it is a deployment issue.

Mr Craig:

I have another question on a matter that was raised with me yesterday. With regard to provision,

there are, obviously, two sectors here: the private sector and the statutory sector. When there is a mismatch in supply and demand, it looks as if the boards are using the private sector to plug the gap, as it probably is a quicker system to implement and, if we are being honest about it, is probably cheaper to implement as well. Is the policy of the Department to go down that route, or, in the longer term, would we be better getting the system right and matching the supply and demand?

Mr McGrath:

We obviously want to match supply and demand, but are you talking about the balance between nursery provision and preschool? It is a mixed economy at the minute. The Minister has certainly indicated that he regards that as a benefit and sees that there are very many high quality preschool providers, as checked by the inspectorate. I do not think that he subscribes to the view that there should be a long-term aim of moving to 100% nursery provision. It is a mixed economy in which preschool provision meets the acceptable standard and is provided through a range of private or voluntary providers, and the Minister regards that as a good contribution. It also reflects and harnesses a lot of the goodwill and resources available in the voluntary and community sector. I do not think that he would be in favour of a move to make it 100% statutory, apart from the significant resource implications that would flow from that.

Mr Craig:

Sorry, John, I am not worried about whether it is private or public; I was asking whether it is policy that we plug the gaps with the private sector.

Mr McGrath:

At the minute, it is quicker to put in more provision through the voluntary or private sector. That approach is more nimble-footed, as opposed to developing formal proposals to create nursery provision, which takes a bit longer and is more expensive.

Ms L Wilson:

It takes longer to respond on the nursery side, although that is not to say that if there were an immediate need and a full class, steps could not be taken to address that, and I think that that did happen last year. There is more flexibility around the community and voluntary sector because of the way it operates, but, certainly, looking at it strategically, we need to look at both sectors.

The Deputy Chairperson:

It seems that we might have a growth business there, Jonathan.

Mr Craig:

A business opportunity.

The Deputy Chairperson:

One wonders how it might work out. I will throw a couple of issues to our guests. You say that you are looking at things. I do not think that we expect you to tell us that the next time you come back, so on the basis that you will not be telling us that you are still looking at things, can you give us some kind of date as to when you will be able to provide the Committee with your conclusions on strategy?

Mr McGrath:

As you know, the Minister is committed to a wide-ranging review after the debate in the Assembly. We still have to firm up the terms of reference of that with him, so I cannot give you a date. Clearly, however, as regards deficiencies in this year's round and any remedial measures even to fix that, something would need to be done fairly quickly to make sure that that applies in the next cycle.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I am going to press you: what does "fairly quickly" mean?

Mr McGrath:

Before the autumn, hopefully. I would rather inform the Committee definitively after we finalise that with the Minister. I would rather not offer something off the top of my head and then it be taken —

The Deputy Chairperson:

So, we can look forward to something around September or October?

Mr McGrath:

That would be something that we would have in mind — certainly an analysis of what happened this time around. Changes might take a bit longer.

Ms L Wilson:

It depends. The terms of reference of the review are not decided yet, so it is really difficult to give a date. Perhaps we might give an indication of a date and write with more information.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Finally, picking up again from Jonathan's point, does the private sector have the capacity to make available additional places at shorter notice?

Ms L Wilson:

Our understanding is that it does. It is mainly community and voluntary as well as private. As I say, we have not yet been told that there is money; we cannot commission any places. That, obviously, is a risk and an issue that we need to be aware of.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I understand the point that you are making. It is an understanding. Do you have something in writing that you could provide to the Committee that confirms how you arrived at that understanding?

Ms L Wilson:

It is based on the information that we are getting back from the education and library boards.

The Deputy Chairperson:

So that is where you are getting the information from. Could I still follow up with the request that you provide to the Committee affirmation or confirmation as to what evidence leads you to that understanding? I would be pleased if you would do that.

Mr McGrath:
Certainly.

The Deputy Chairperson:
I see that the Chairman has arrived, much to my pleasure.

Mr Storey:
Finish the session, David.

The Deputy Chairperson:
OK.

Mr Lunn:
I declare an interest as a governor of a nursery school. I could better understand it all, John and Linda, if it were not foreseeable. At one level, you could say that perhaps we are not doing too badly if we are looking at 22,000 places every year and it is down to 700 dissatisfied customers. However, on another level, you could say that we have access to birth rates. The trend is fairly obvious: it has been dropping for a number of years and now it has spiked. Do you think that undersupply is a temporary situation, or is it liable to continue?

Mr McGrath:
The point that we made to Jonathan was that we are not sure that we have undersupply at the minute; we just maybe do not have supply in the right places. The first thing to pin down is whether the distribution of places is right; in other words, whether we have the right resources but in the wrong places. If it turns out that there is a gap between supply and demand, clearly we would have to look at that in resourcing terms.

Ms L Wilson:
The Department took steps this year to try to address some of the issues that arose last year. We tried to make the total number of places available better match what we estimated the supply would be this year. We also introduced a two-stage process to hold two-year-olds back and to give parents more choice. That was with a view to maximising the number of places available. We tried to improve it this year, and, obviously, we still have more to do.

Mr Lunn:
I notice something that I had not seen before: the staff-to-child ratio is very different in the voluntary sector to what it is in the statutory sector, and yet it seems to be much easier for the voluntary sector to take up the slack in these situations even though it evidently needs more teachers. Why is there such a difference: 1:8 as opposed to 1:13?

Ms L Wilson:
The statutory nursery sector is a less flexible sector in which to create or extend a nursery school. For example, to extend a school in the statutory sector, the school must bring forward a development proposal and go through the development process. There are issues around accommodation and recruiting teachers, whereas the voluntary and community sector is more flexible in terms of premises and staffing.

Mr Lunn:

Why would the voluntary sector need a 1:8 ratio when 1:13 is good enough in the statutory sector?

Ms L Wilson:

My understanding is that that ratio was set by DHSSPS for type of provision.

Mr Lunn:

I read that, although I do not understand it. What is the difference? This is an issue about the correct ratios for child safety, yet one is more than 50% higher than the other.

Mr McGrath:

I am not sure about that. We will come back to you on it. However, it is important to mention the fact that the nature of the staff is different. Nursery schools have trained teachers. Preschools are an informal education system, so there is a lower level of skilling required. We are not talking about like for like. Nevertheless, if the Committee wants, we are happy to come back with further information on that.

Mr Lunn:

I know that you are not talking about like for like, and the statutory sector continually points that out, but it is a fact that the system would be completely lost without the voluntary sector — it is in the figures. For my money, it does an excellent job.

Finally, on admission criteria, you mentioned two priorities: social disadvantage and the July/August issue, which is being dealt with. Following that, preschools will be free to set their own criteria. But there are differences between schools. I wonder why there is not a standard set of criteria. One issue that I have come across is that a child who has a family relationship with someone who has been a governor of a preschool is given priority. I am not talking about someone who is currently a governor; it applies if they have ever been one. Apparently, it applies if the child's grandfather was a governor. Although that criterion is well down the list of criteria, it seems ridiculous. Is there not a case for a standard set of criteria?

Ms L Wilson:

John, is it usual practice for each board of governors to set the criteria for its school?

The Deputy Chairperson:

I do not mind you having a chat together, but I need to hear what you are saying, as do members, so please address your comments to us.

Ms L Wilson:

Sorry, I was just asking John to comment on that point in relation to all schools.

Mr McGrath:

We have a main school system where most boards of governors are free to establish their own admission criteria, and that system is mapped onto preschools. You could argue, as you have, that a standard set of admission criteria might be better, rather than leaving, as you exemplified, a fairly idiosyncratic approach. However, it reflects that general tenor of the school system that we currently have, which affords boards of governors that freedom. Whether they should have that

freedom is perhaps an issue to return to.

Mr Lunn:

Chairman, I shall just make my usual comment about the acoustics in here. When you cannot hear people sitting three yards away, there is something wrong. We might do better without the microphones.

The Deputy Chairperson:

We have picked that up, and it is a valid point. It is certainly not as good as last week, and that was a major improvement. Last week was good, and that is the standard that the Committee wants to maintain.

Mr McDevitt:

I want to explore a couple of specifics, and then I have a broader policy question. When you were talking about the shift of childcare policy back to DHSSPS, you argued a departmental rationale: you would not want something being delivered in one Department that might be legislated for in another. Why is that an argument?

Ms L Wilson:

I was flagging up the risk between a policy being delivered by one Department when legislative authority and operational responsibility lies with another.

We would have needed to correct the legislative position. Indeed, there are issues about DE's legislative authority in relation to Sure Start that we need to address and which are proving quite complex. We would have needed to bring the legislation into place.

Mr McDevitt:

Did you bring forward any proposals to the previous Minister to do that? Did you suggest to her that it would be a good thing to do, and that we should move to tidy up those legislative issues?

Ms L Wilson:

Considerable work was done to try to identify how that transfer might be carried out. However, because of the way in which the legislation sits within the integrated health and social services policy, we did not come up with a proposal that we could put to the Minister.

Mr McDevitt:

I was going to say that we have a preschool strategy, but we do not really have that. What we have instead is a preschool mess, and I will come to that in a second. We do have an early years strategy, which we will be debating later this year in the House and which very much factors childcare into the Executive's response to the needs of children from nought to six and into the need to support parents in a new and transformed way in this region. However, two Departments cannot sort out the basics of aligning that policy.

Ms L Wilson:

It is not a case of not being able to sort out the basics. Departments operate under legislation and statute. Health and social services is very complex and interwoven, and we did not find a way of identifying those particular areas and transferring them to education without also having to transfer a significant amount of responsibility and expand education into areas that it had never

previously been in. That was essentially the problem.

Mr McDevitt:

Is that why there is no statutory right to a preschool place at the moment?

Ms L Wilson:

No. That is a separate issue.

Mr McDevitt:

Do you think that there should be a statutory right to a preschool place, and that every child in this region should have the right to a preschool place at age three?

Ms L Wilson:

That is for the Minister to decide.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Let us be fair to the witness.

Mr McDevitt:

OK. I take your point, Chair, and I will approach it in a different manner. The Minister said in the House that the July and August birthdays criteria would be withdrawn. How much progress has been made in bringing forward legislation to deal with that problem for preschool and nursery places?

Ms L Wilson:

The Minister said last Tuesday that he intended to look at addressing the criteria and the issue of July and August birthdays. We have not done anything within a week.

Mr McDevitt:

Does the Department see preschool as an integral part of a child's education? If so, is it content that the standards that are available to all those children who were able to avail themselves of a preschool or nursery place are consistent across the board?

Ms L Wilson:

The Department does see preschool as an integral part of education. There are mixed reports by the Education and Training Inspectorate — in the sense of a span of such reports — for preschools, both voluntary and nursery, and the reports state that the provision in both settings is outstanding. Therefore, it is fair to say that the provision is comparable. That is not a scientific analysis, but we do get a similar span and breadth of reports.

Mr McDevitt:

Would you describe the current preschool and nursery provision arrangements as good at a regional level? Do you think that they are fit for purpose and are meeting the needs and demands of children and parents in this region?

Mr McGrath:

For the most part, the system should be able to do that. We put as much emphasis on standards and improvements in preschool as we do in primary and post-primary schools. We have the

inspectorate, and we adopt as robust an approach to any drop in standards in preschool or nursery schools as we adopt elsewhere. You made the point that preschool is an integral part of the education of children. It is there to add value to their education and life chances, and it needs to provide proper standards. That is why we have the inspectorate as the sort of regulatory mechanism.

Mr McDevitt:

Mr McGrath, do you think that the mixed economy system, as you described it, is capable of meeting the needs of parents and children in this region?

Mr McGrath:

It should be able to.

Mr McDevitt:

So why do we have 700 people dropping out at first opportunity?

Mr McGrath:

That is a different question. That is about matching the availability of resources to where demand is.

Mr McDevitt:

Is that not the definition of meeting need?

Mr McGrath:

We need to ensure that we have the resources and the places and that they are available in the right place.

Mr McDevitt:

So you believe that you have the right number of places in the right place for everyone?

Mr McGrath:

No. It is perfectly clear that there is a mismatch at the minute, and we need to address that as a relatively first-order priority.

Mr McDevitt:

By definition, therefore, the needs of many people have not been met.

Mr McGrath:

In this case, the needs of some children may well not be met at the moment, and we need to do something about that.

Mr McDevitt:

So the system is not meeting the needs of all parents and children?

Mr McGrath:

In that narrow definition —

Mr McDevitt:

It is a pretty basic definition.

Mr McGrath:

In a narrow definition, there could be hundreds of parents who have not got the places that they might want, and that is not meeting 100% need. However, with regard to a system that is geared to provide the right standards of preschool nursery education to give kids a start in life, we think that it is a pretty good system. No system is perfect, and there is room for improvement.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I do not want to lose the thread of this. I want to allow Jonathan in so that we can tie this up.

Mr Craig:

John, you were asked the specific question of whether it meets the needs of the children. You gave us the broad answer that, roughly, it does. If it does, and that applies to the preschool sector and the primary school sector, how come, even today, children arrive at secondary school unable to read or write? I declare an interest as a member of the board of governors of a secondary school.

Mr McGrath:

That is a very good question. I will track back. There are two issues. On the issue of need, there is supply and demand, and matching that. I thought that Conall's point was about the provision, and children need quality provision when they get it. The two issues are not the same. To be clear on the point that you make, that demonstrates that the system is not doing what it should in some areas. Children should not end up going to post-primary school essentially having deficiencies or almost having to repeat years. It is not enough to ensure that we put money in the right places; we need to ensure that it delivers the outcomes — no less in early years or in primary school. Putting money in is one thing, but we must monitor the outcomes. Increasingly for children, it is a case of monitoring the outcomes as they go through the system. By the time they reach secondary school, they are already in the lower order and have already fallen behind. That is when the difficulty arises. Similarly, some kids leave without five good GCSEs and end up having to do remedial work or something in FE. Their life chances have been impaired.

Mr Craig:

It is quality of service, not just the mass provision of the service. If the service is failing, we might as well not have a service.

Mr McGrath:

That is the point I am making. Preschool is not there to occupy children during the day or take them away from their parents. It is there to add value educationally and to get them in the right place when they go into the formal system. Similarly, the primary system has a duty to ensure that, when it moves kids on to post-primary education, they are in the right place in the development trajectory.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Jonathan —

Mr McDevitt:

Very briefly, Chair, if I could —

The Deputy Chairperson:

I was just going to say that, due to that kind intervention, you have one more minute.

Mr McDevitt:

I want to explore this question because it is at the heart of the argument. In housing, we have very clear established criteria of objective need, which basically says that we must provide housing to people where they want it. That is it in a nutshell. We do not apply the market test to, for example, that there is plenty of housing available in this city over there; it just happens to be in the wrong part of town but you should go and sit there. Mr McGrath knows that from a previous post in his career. However, you appear to be arguing here that that does not apply to preschool and that we should feel able to suggest that offering a child a place 30 miles away or in another part of a city or town that is clearly not in their own community is meeting that child's needs.

I would be very interested to get a clear, documented statement in writing from the Department on how it defines need in the context of preschool education in the region. That is at the heart of the debate. If we are to meet need, we need to define it.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I will make a request. If the Committee agrees that it would find that type of information valuable, would you provide it?

Mr McGrath:

Certainly, Deputy Chairman. We will provide that information if it is requested in the usual way, whereby the Committee Clerk writes to the Department and sets out terms. I want to be clear; I am not saying that a situation in which places are unfilled and parents have not had their needs met elsewhere is a satisfactory system that meets need. I am not saying that. As I said to Jonathan, any mismatch whereby places are provided, are funded by the public purse, but are not actually being utilised is clearly not value for money.

The Deputy Chairperson:

We hear what you say. Members might have a different opinion. That is what this is all about. We want to know whether that is working well.

Ms Boyle:

Thank you both for your briefing. On the back of Jonathan's question; the brief states that there is evidence that early years education has a powerful influence on children's lives and outcomes. Is there a strategy or will one be put in place for early years intervention programmes in order to ensure the inclusion of children with disabilities and special educational needs?

Ms L Wilson:

The draft early years strategy made a number of references to special educational needs. One point that came through strongly in the consultation, which the Department accepts, is that more explicit attention needs to be paid to children with disabilities and special educational needs. We will look at that in the final strategy.

Ms Boyle:

That is a real concern for parents. More than attention is needed; measures need to be put in place for staff training and also to raise awareness and acknowledgement of special educational needs.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Just to wrap up the session, can you tell the Committee what involvement there is between the Department, the Department for Employment and Learning, the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture on cross-departmental strategies and thinking on early years?

Ms L Wilson:

As regards the early years strategy, there are a number of joint actions between DE and DHSSPS. We work closely with that Department, less so with DEL or DARD. There is less engagement with DEL or DARD.

The Deputy Chairperson:

OK. I am quite used to your terminologies. You say that it is “less”. My question was: what is that involvement?

Ms L Wilson:

At present, a subcommittee — a working group — has been set up between DHSSPS and us.

The Deputy Chairperson:

At official level?

Ms L Wilson:

Yes. I will need to check what other engagement there might be at ministerial level.

The Deputy Chairperson:

Will you come back to us on that? Something is floating in the Committee on an idea at membership level. I want to know for the Committee’s sake what is happening at official level. Can you tell us what you are discussing and how far on those discussions are?

Ms L Wilson:

Yes.

The Deputy Chairperson:

I am grateful for that. I thank you both very much for coming. It has been a useful discussion. There is no doubt that we will follow it up.