



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Education

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Early Years Strategy: Departmental Briefing

16 May 2012

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

### Early Years Strategy: Departmental Briefing

16 May 2012

**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Michaela Boyle  
Mr Jonathan Craig  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr Daithí McKay  
Mr Sean Rogers

**Witnesses:**

Dr Marlene Collins	Department of Education
Mrs Cathy Galway	Department of Education
Mr Bryan Laverty	Department of Education
Mr John McGrath	Department of Education

**The Chairperson:** John, as always, you are welcome to the Committee. I hope this evidence session is as productive as the previous one, although I am not just as convinced that the early years strategy is in as good a position as special educational needs. We will have a discussion first rather than predetermine any outcomes.

**Mr John McGrath (Department of Education):** *[Inaudible.]*

**The Chairperson:** You are very welcome.

**Mr McGrath:** Thank you again, Chair. I am glad to be here and I hope that we have a fruitful discussion. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to update it on progress in analysing the consultation responses and on the fundamental issues that the consultation on the draft early years 0-6 strategy has raised. The analysis is now complete, and a response document is in preparation.

As you will see from our briefing paper, we received a considerable response to the formal consultation. Of the almost 2,000 received, approximately 1,200 were detailed narrative responses. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the useful and informative quality of many of those responses. There was a wide spectrum of views, from the more strategic perspective offered by a range of respondents to, in some cases, an essentially local or personal view offered by a parent or a preschool setting.

We provide an overview of the main issues in the consultation responses. As you see, taken on a strictly numerical count, the responses are overwhelmingly negative. Further analysis reveals that

although over 90% of respondents do not agree with the aim, vision, issues and actions under the four objectives, when broken down by sector, between 60% and 80% of the organisations agreed with the various aims and actions. However, even when they agreed with the overall aims and objectives, they raised issues about the actions designed to achieve them. The responses, therefore, overwhelmingly highlighted the need for more clarity about what the strategy actually is, who will be responsible for leading on it and delivering it, and where the resources will come from.

There was a divergence of opinion on some aspects, with some respondents wanting the focus to be on early education and making the much-needed improvements in preschool — including addressing a range of residual issues around preschool admissions dating back to 2004 — and the establishment of more effective links with foundation stage. Others want the Department of Education (DE) to lead a more fully integrated education and care strategy. Many of the issues raised about preschool were also addressed in the recent review. Of course, resource constraints are more evident than would have been the case when the strategy was originally set in train. In other cases, the Minister has made the policy clear; for example, in relation to statutory provision and a partnership approach to the preschool programme that involves the voluntary and private sectors.

Clearly, the Minister wants to take stock and decide the best approach to take in revisiting the strategy, while also taking into account the time that has elapsed since the original development of the strategy and the current context. It might be worth noting, therefore, that since the inception of work on the strategy, there have been a number of developments in this area: two changes of Administration, a realignment of care and childminding back to the Department of Health, new Programme for Government commitments, emerging policy on daycare and child poverty targets, the formation of the children and young person's strategic partnership, and more recently, the new delivering social change framework led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which aims to provide a framework through which Ministers will work together to tackle cross-cutting social issues, including early intervention.

Given the Programme for Government commitment on preschool and wider education priorities, the Minister is keen to ensure that the early education environment is supportive of an integrated approach to meeting the wider multifaceted needs of families. At this point, a number of issues need to be addressed to strengthen the position of early education and its contribution to improved outcomes that need urgent attention.

The Minister is committed to working with ministerial colleagues to enhance delivery of a range of early years and early intervention services. Indeed, he had a discussion with Minister Poots recently on that very subject. Equally, that must be balanced against the pressing need to deliver much-needed and sustainable improvements in early education, and his announcement yesterday highlighted further investment in early years.

The Department will work to revise strategies within the framework set down by the Minister. To date, he is still reflecting how he wishes to reshape the strategy in light of the issues raised in the consultation, his wider priorities and the current strategic context. He will set out a way forward before the summer recess when he is in a position to do so.

**The Chairperson:** John, I wish we were in the same place as we were in relation to the previous discussion. I have to say, and this is a personal view, that this is an absolute fiasco. Members of this Committee will know, as you and others will, that I struggle when I come to try to understand the early years setting. I will admit that. It is complex and it is diverse.

However, despite all that has been said in the consultation, despite all the views that people have sent and concerns that have been raised about the direction that this policy was taking, the Minister yesterday, and this is where it is all going to be completely different to the applause that we gave the Minister earlier for listening to the issues around special educational needs, announced that the Department continues to pour money into preschool provision: £3.9 million was given yesterday to the voluntary and community sector without our having any clear and coherent policy, despite what the inspectorate says about the standard of provision, despite there being a level playing field out there, and despite there being a huge issue of disparity around provision. In some places it is good, in some places it is poor, and in some places, you can get it only if you travel 50 miles.

All of those problems exist. You might say that we are not comparing the same things, but it is all preschool provision. It is early years. We do not know whether it is 0-6, 0-3 or 3-6, and I am sorry for being so negative, but I cannot see how we are getting a resolution of this early years strategy. What can be done now to try to put something in place that clearly does not have public support?

**Mr McGrath:** You said quite a lot, there, Chair, so I will work my way through.

**The Chairperson:** There is nothing new in that, says you.

**Mr McGrath:** Clearly, the response to the strategy is stark, and it has raised issues. The Minister is very clear that he wants to sit down and look at it, but he also wants to be very clear in his own mind what he wants to produce. There has been a debate; is this an education strategy largely focused to fit in with the rest of our education strategies to complete the suite, or is it some wider, broader, cross-departmental strategy covering in particular healthcare and all Departments? I think a resolution of that issue is something that the Minister will be taking forward. Clearly, he needs and wants to put in place certainly the education dimension to enable him to have his complete suite of policies in place following on from your earlier discussion about SEN.

Equally, the Executive are looking at the scope for joined-up working, with early intervention being one area that will be looked at. They have set up the Delivering Social Change framework in recent times, with a programme board led by the two junior Ministers. So, the Minister is very clear that he wants to sort what he wants to do in the current context and be very clear about what it is and what it is not.

The nature of preschool provision is that it is diverse compared to primary and post-primary provision. It covers everything from statutory nursery provision to voluntary and private providers. Complexity and diversity are not necessarily bad things. Preschool provision may look complex and diverse compared to statutory school provision, but our view and the Minister's is that it offers a richness of choice and experience. The last time we were here talking about the early years strategy, I cited information from the chief inspector's report demonstrating that issues about less-than-satisfactory preschool provision are no more marked than they are in the primary and post-primary sectors. In fact, they are less marked. There are certain issues in the preschool sector, and I will ask Marlene to say something about that in a few minutes. The notion that because the sector is diverse and complex it somehow offers less than a high standard of care in general is misguided.

In recent days, the Minister announced significant investment over the next three years. That will be universally welcomed and should not be seen as being instead of, or as a block to, sorting out the strategy. There is a Programme for Government commitment for preschool places for all those who want them, and we are doing a lot of work on that at the moment. I will ask Marlene to offer, from an inspectorate point of view, some thoughts on the diversity of the preschool sector and the general level of standards in it.

**Dr Marlene Collins (Department of Education):** Quite often, we talk about the statutory sector and the voluntary and the private sector, and people refer to the standards achieved in the statutory sector. In the chief inspector's report, we say that there are strengths in each sector, whether statutory or voluntary. Our latest figures show that 83% of the settings inspected in the statutory sector are in the good-to-outstanding category. In the voluntary and private settings, 74% are in the good-to-outstanding category. The figures show that the voluntary group is moving up slightly. However, the statutory group needs to be subdivided into nursery schools and nursery units. Nursery units are a growth area, with around 19 or 20 having come on stream since 2010. More development proposals are with the Department. Among nursery schools, 92% fall into the good-to-outstanding category. These are only rough figures, and they are currently being updated as more inspection material comes in and more data is received.

The percentage of nursery units in the good-to-outstanding category is 78%, while voluntary and private settings achieve 74% in the same category. These figures conflict slightly with the view that best practice is always to be found in statutory settings, and we need to look at that. To take that through, that shows that the voluntary and private groups are doing as well in inspections as one would say nursery units have been doing. We are concentrating on that area to see how we can raise the standards in nursery units as well as the voluntary sector.

**The Chairperson:** In those inspections, are you comparing like with like? There is a difference between statutory preschool provision and that provided by the voluntary and community sector. You are not comparing them on the same basis. One is a legal statutory provision and has higher standards to meet, a lot more requirements to achieve, and a lot more rigorous processes to go through than the other. Therefore, you cannot compare like with like.

**Dr Collins:** We inspect them equally and under the same conditions. Yes, nursery schools and nursery units will have purpose-built accommodation and will usually have a higher level of physical resources, but, when we go out to inspect, we do so against our own Together Towards Improvement standards. We expect the same from both, so when we issue a report we refer to children's achievements, provision, and leadership and management. That is what we issue a report against, so we are inspecting like with like.

**Mr Rogers:** On that point, nursery units and nursery schools have qualified teachers. In the voluntary sector, teachers are not qualified necessarily; so how can you compare like with like?

**Dr Collins:** We are comparing like with like. The voluntary and private settings have minimum standards of qualifications for their staff. As well as that, they must have expert support from a qualified teacher, or an early years specialist in the case of some early years organisations. They have that type of support. We are finding more and more that the number of teachers working in voluntary settings is increasing. Again, it is not about the qualification; it is about the quality of the provision. That is why we are trying to differentiate between them. If you are saying that nursery schools and nursery units always have a qualified teacher, then we still have a discrepancy between those two types of settings at the moment. One is coming in at 92% and the other is coming in at 78%. Having a teacher does not always mean that the quality of provision is going to be better than in a setting where you do not have a qualified teacher. Ultimately, it is about the provision.

**Mr Rogers:** To me, it is worrying that nursery units are coming out at 78%, while the voluntaries are coming out very well at 74%.

**Dr Collins:** That is an example showing that someone who may not be a qualified teacher, if they have the professional endeavour, can bring their setting up to the same standard as the statutory setting.

**Mr Lunn:** You are assessing children's achievement at a particular age, obviously, which is at around three or four years of age. We have asked about the effect of one sector or the other on how children compare when they reach seven or eight years of age. Does the differential — which does not appear to be that wide, from what you are saying — tend to disappear, or is there evidence that, when children reach seven or eight, for example, it is still clear that the statutory sector provides them with a better grounding than the voluntary sector?

**Dr Collins:** We do not have that evidence. The only evidence available at the moment is the Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) research, which indicates that it is not the setting or the length of time a child spends in a setting that is important; it is the quality of support and provision given. It shows that that is consistently carried on through, but at the moment we do not have research to compare the voluntary and statutory setting.

**Mr Lunn:** There seems to have been some research done in 1998, I think. It has been referred to here before, but it has never been updated. What is your impression?

**Dr Collins:** I do not have an impression; I am just giving you feedback on the figures.

**Mr Kinahan:** Going back to the years from 0 to 6, I was intrigued by the comment that more than 90% of the respondents disagree with the aims, visions, issues and actions, but further analysis shows that, when broken down by section, between 60% and 75% of organisations agree. I would love to see an analysis —

**Mr Craig:** Agree with what, though?

**Mr Kinahan:** Yes. They are two complete opposites. When you were giving your brief, you said that the Minister is looking at reshaping the strategy. It looks as though we need to have a complete review, taking on board all of the responses that have come in. Is that actually what is going to happen?

**Mr McGrath:** The Minister is taking stock. Obviously, he is looking at what he has got and is setting it in the current context. A lot of things have happened, and continue to happen, which were not in the frame when it started, so, to an extent, you could call it a complete review. I will ask Cathy to say something about the figures quoted earlier.

**Mrs Cathy Galway (Department of Education):** Yes, that is what happened. The organisations gave responses that were generally more favourable to the actions, issues and objectives. However, even when they said that they agreed with the overall aim or the overall vision, they still raised a number of concerns about the actions set out in the strategy to achieve those aims and vision. They were generally more positive about the main objective on collaboration, integration, quality and equity than the parents and the schools, but, even so, they still raised a number of very significant concerns about the actions in the draft. Although, it is positive in a quantitative sense, the qualitative responses raised quite a significant amount of issues about the actions.

**Mr Kinahan:** I just wanted to make sure that it has been taken on board.

**Mr Craig:** I am glad that the Deputy Chairperson got us back to the issue, which is the strategy or, to be honest, the lack of one. Some of the figures are alarming. You asked:

*"Is it the right/appropriate vision for an early years strategy?"*

In the responses, 90-3% said that it was not. That was the best result you received in that table. That is incredible. That is the view of the vast majority of people who responded. I know that you are saying that some organisations thought that your strategy was not that bad; but that does not reflect what people think. What is worrying about this, John, is that — and I am serious about this— growing evidence from academics and from experience across the board suggests that, if we are ever to tackle underachievement in our schools, the early years strategy will be the one to fundamentally turn things around. We are firefighting once children get to primary school, and we are definitely firefighting once they get into post-primary schools.

When will the Department work with other Departments and come up with a serious strategy to tackle this? I am of the firm belief that — and I have made this clear to the Minister — the issue goes way beyond Education and involves Health, Social Development and all the other elements out there. If truth be told, it goes back almost to the birth of the child and the environment in which he or she is raised. If we do not tackle all of those issues, the strategy will not be worth tuppence, and that is, generally, the public's voice and frustration. Will we work with other Departments on a major revision of the strategy?

**Mr McGrath:** First, I agree entirely with your points about early intervention. That is clear. Everybody says it, but we need to invest more with other Departments, particularly Health but also DSD, in early interventions. The Minister discussed that with Minister Poots the other day, and early interventions are fundamental to some of the discussions under the Delivering Social Change framework, because life chances are affected almost from birth in some areas. We are all agreed on that.

The reaction to the existing and previous draft is chastening, and I suspect that part of it is down to lack of clarity in the first place about what the strategy was going to be and not be. The Minister is taking a fresh, clear look at this, and he is very clear that he wants to ensure that the educational element is set in place as quickly as possible. However, he also recognises the need to work with his ministerial colleagues and the need for the education and health sectors in particular to work closely. He is exploring how that can be done either jointly with other Departments or through the Delivering Social Change mechanism, which is a recent arrival on the framework and offers potential to get better joined-up working on some of the life chance issues on which no one Department has the answer.

**Mr Craig:** John, I am not disagreeing with what you are saying.

**Mr McGrath:** Nor I with you.

**Mr Craig:** I am asking this: when will we take a more strategic approach to early years provision? I must admit that it was refreshing to have the Minister in here earlier, and I welcome the new approach being taken on the SEN issue. When will the Department turn the ship around on this issue, because, at the minute, you are the Titanic and you have just bounced off the iceberg? It is dreadful. Can you turn this around, and if so, how long will it take to put a strategy in place in conjunction with other Departments?

**Mr McGrath:** To paraphrase what you are saying: how long it will take to turn the vessel around depends on its size. Some work is going on across government on using the Delivering Social

Change framework to look at the scope for early interventions. I have been party to some of those discussions and the Minister supports them. It may well be a mechanism, linked to the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership — which did not exist several years ago — to get joined-up working on this. The Minister might take the view that that offers the way forward for joined-up working, but there is a core educational component that he needs to put in place as well.

You are right: a fresh look is being taken. Complimentary remarks have been made about the Minister's thoughts on SEN and I hope that the same clarity and freshness would come into early years education. This is important, and it should not be in the position it is in now. However, there is a timeliness now, with the wider work that the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the junior Ministers have set in train, and there is a better context to get joined-up working at strategic level across Departments, rather than at project level. A lot of time and energy has gone into that, Jonathan, and the Minister hopes to set out the way forward before the summer recess. I think he may well be back before the Committee on the subject before the summer recess.

**The Chairperson:** A vast array of material has been provided. The Department spent a considerable amount of money in work carried out by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. The EPPNI Summary Report was published. Then, the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education report, the English version, came out. It is interesting what was said:

*"Lessons from Case Studies: EPPNI undertook 3 case studies in a nursery school, playgroup and private day nursery where there had been indicators of good practice. Significantly, the case studies have shown how diverse early years settings are. They show that there is no 'level playing field' in terms of the training of staff, staff salaries, conditions of service, adult-child ratios, resources or accommodation."*

What we have is an attempt, through statistics, to say that one is not as good as the other or that one is not performing as well as the other, but the reality is that it is not a level playing field.

Yet, all of that information, paid for by the taxpayer in 2006, seems to have been put into the shredder. What cognisance has been taken by the Department of a report that it carried out? If the report was reflected in the consultation, dear help us, because of the results that we got and which have been referred to. I have never seen another consultation that had 90% down the list. It is worrying, there is no doubt. It is serious. It is not a reflection — let me say this — on any of the staff in front of me today. This is not personal, so it is not a criticism of you. However, how do we get the EPPNI document reflected in a positive early years strategy that can work?

**Mr McGrath:** Obviously, it is one contribution to the debate. Chair, you keep referring to the fact that there is not a level playing field. I am not sure that I understand. There is diversity and complexity here.

**The Chairperson:** John, it is not just me who is saying that. The EPPNI report was carried out, paid for and stamped by the Department of Education and it said that there was "no level playing field" in page iv under the heading, "Lessons from Case Studies". So, if the Department cannot even take on board what it paid for —

**Mr McGrath:** Yes, Chair, but time passes. Marlene had just run over the improvements that we have seen in different sectors.

**The Chairperson:** John, are you saying that to get to where Dr Collins has said we are, then what we have done in the variety of provision is that we have dealt with the issues of training and staff, salaries and conditions, service, adult-child ratios, resources and accommodation?

**Mr McGrath:** We are dealing with a number of those. The Minister has made it clear that he believes there are benefits in a mixed economy. He has clarified that. From his point of view, moving towards an all-statutory provision of nurseries and nursery units is not on. He regards the contribution, particularly of the voluntary and community sector of preschool provision, as a vital asset to be made best use of. Clearly, there are improvements in preschool provision by community and voluntary and private sectors, and Marlene has articulated the basis on which we test those.

The issue about a level playing field is not so clear any more. There are clear issues, but the critical thing is having access to preschool provision. The length of provision is not a critical determinant either. We have issues around people looking for full-time as opposed to part-time provision when it is

not necessarily clear that full-time provision gives any added benefit to the child at all. We need to work through the complexities of that, and it is an issue that was flagged up in the preschool review.

This is a moving feast; six years is a long time for developments, particularly in this field. Arlene has cited some issues already and made the point that issues around nursery units will have to be considered in the context of whether there is something systemic about that model. That is why the Minister has made the point. A lot of things have happened in the past five or six years in this field, and a lot of things are on the go now. He wants to stand back and take a fundamental look at what he wants to have in this strategy, what he wants it to be and where it fits with the rest of his strategies and the wider Executive targets, particularly the Programme for Government.

**The Chairperson:** The last inspectorate report of 2008-2010 said:

*"there continues to be a disparity between the statutory and voluntary/private sectors in relation to the qualifications of the staff".*

It is not me just saying that, nor is it just EPPNI saying it; it is in the inspector's report. It also says that there is a need for:

*"a coherent approach to the provision of continuing professional development for all early years practitioners to work towards a more consistently skilled work force."*

If that is the case, and it was in 2008-2010, what steps has the Department taken to address it, and how does that align with the money that has been, I would say, thrown at this sector, including another £3.9 million yesterday? That is not to say that there is not money in the system, but what I am absolutely determined to get to are the outcomes we are getting for that money. Is it helping to ensure that children have the best possible education provision, or are we still chasing round the trees on whether this is education or care? Is that debate still going on? Do parents even understand or appreciate what it is? If we are spending £50 million on 23,000 children, is it giving us the outcomes for those children?

Clearly, there is a disconnection between what is happening in the preschool setting and the early years policy. When children get to the end of primary school, and one in four are leaving not having reached adequate levels of numeracy and literacy, that cannot be blamed on changes in Government. It also cannot be blamed on turbulent times for the economy: it is the system. We cannot be blamed because we have had two elections in the middle of all that. It has been going on for a good number of years.

**Mr McGrath:** I know, and I have made the point previously that there are failings in our system when children come out of primary school like that. A number of them will have entered primary school with a less than satisfactory background; we all know that, and it is something we want to address. Equally, there are clear issues about performance in the primary sector that leave some children behind. You ask what we have done in response to issues flagged up in the previous chief inspector's report.

**The Chairperson:** Yes, and how it aligns with decisions that have been made. For example, yesterday's decision in the Minister's statement was that £3.9 million was given to the voluntary and community sector. How does that align with achieving what has been stated in the inspector's report? I hope there is a rationale for the decision that was made yesterday.

**Mr McGrath:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Is it based on trying to bring one group up to ensure that there is no longer a non-level playing field? Is it to advance the requirements of the inspectorate? Can you set it in a proper context so that we see what the problem was? In fairness to your colleagues on special education needs who were here earlier, they set out a very coherent document showing the proposals and the changes and that no legislative change is needed. It was reasonably straightforward, and even someone such as me was able to follow it. All I want to know is how we are dealing with EPPNI and the inspector's report in light of the money that has been given. Are you convinced that that will give the outcomes that we all collectively want, which is an improved educational advantage for our children going through the system?



**Mr McGrath:** We will produce a paper on that, which may also reflect updated information from the chief inspector over the past couple of years, some of which I shared with the Committee the previous time we spoke.

**Mrs Galway:** The evidence from EPPNI is that the preschool experience provides a lasting benefit for children right up to Key Stage 1 and beyond. We also have to consider the home-learning environment. The outcomes for children are a product of what happens in school and preschool and what happens in the home. That came out quite clearly in the response to the consultation. It referred to the need to focus on what is happening in the home-learning environment and how we manage the transitions for children from home to preschool and from preschool to foundation and through to the Key Stages.

**The Chairperson:** A phrase often used about special education needs is "integrated strategy", and it was used earlier. The words "integrated" and "co-ordinated" are used. How do we get that in early years? I worry that there is a them-and-us situation between the statutory and voluntary sectors and that never the twain shall meet. We have had that problem in the past. How can we have a co-ordinated early years provision and that one side does not see the other as getting undue advantage when one is a statutory legal provision and the other is voluntary? Are we not always putting ourselves in a no-win situation? One setting says that you can have staff who are qualified to NVQ level 3, while the other setting says that you must have a qualified teacher, which brings with it all of the legislative requirements of standards, salary, pay scale and so on. That is not the case with both, yet we expect the same outcome from both.

**Mr McGrath:** The way you liken them suggests that there is one highly regulated sector with standards and a much looser one. Standards and pay scales apply in the voluntary sector. It is not a case of regulated versus unregulated. Part of the difficulty is that we are used to statutory provision provided by teachers for the rest of the education sector, whereas early years is a much more diverse economy. However, that diverse economy works in health and in other sectors. It is the norm. Perhaps it seems confusing when looked at through the prism of the education sector. We will look at getting better planning of early years provision when moving forward with the Programme for Government target, and we also hope that when ESA comes into being it will provide a better framework for area planning. We are looking at whether the creation of the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership has the potential to offer a better vehicle for planning and providing early intervention.

**The Chairperson:** Steven Agnew's Bill, which we had in front of us a few weeks ago, is about co-ordinated services. I will go back to a point that you made earlier, John. The regime is different partly because one part is inspected by the Health Department while the other is inspected by DE. Sometimes, although it is the inspectorate that will carry out elements of inspection in preschool provision, there are standards required of the voluntary sector that relate to health. What correlation is there between DHSSPS, the inspectorate and DE to ensure that there is a co-ordinated approach to the whole thing?

**Dr Collins:** Trusts inspect voluntary groups annually to ensure that they are meeting standards. When the ETI inspects a setting, we are looking at the quality of provision as opposed to some of the things that the trusts may be looking at, which might be health and safety issues. Equally, ETI looks at child protection, pastoral care and the health and safety of children. We will flag those up and include them in the appendix to our report if they are not there. I should say that we have had some pilot schemes of working together with colleagues in the trusts, looking towards carrying out a joint inspection. We have been trying that in order to see how we could take that forward.

To go back slightly: sometimes I find it difficult to separate the two sides in order to talk about statutory or voluntary provision, because it almost feels as if we are pitting them against each other, which we are not. This is not useful, and we already have examples in Northern Ireland where we have statutory nursery schools working with voluntary playgroups to move things forward, and we aspire to see everything moving forward in that way.

You referred to the previous chief inspector's report: we have moved on from that, and the ongoing work is starting to show through by way of improvements in provision in voluntary and statutory sectors. Although the statutory sector might be seen to be where the quality provision is, it needs to sustain that provision and move forward. For example, we have a nursery school that has entered 'Every School a Good School' and is going through formal procedures, and equally, a nursery unit. So, there is a need to ensure that they move forward in the statutory sector.

There are new qualifications coming into the voluntary sector since the last chief inspector's report. We are looking at a higher qualification coming through. There has been a lot of work with colleges to ensure that they ensure that staff coming to work in the voluntary sector are more highly skilled and moving forward. Quite a lot has gone forward, and we will hopefully see movement there.

We talk about standards in nursery units. Two years ago, around 70% of them fell into the good-to-outstanding category. There has been a lot of work in primary schools to look at the management of nursery schools. They have moved up slightly in the latest figures, and that is mirrored by an increase in leadership and management in primary schools. You can see that all the different phases in the preschool settings need to move forward; not only to maintain where they are at, but to increase the provision.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you. Clearly, this is an issue that the Department will, I am sure, return to. I do not think there is any other option, because it is not fit for purpose.

John, you said the Minister was hoping to come back to us with something. Will that be before the summer recess?

**Mr McGrath:** Yes. That is his intention.

**The Chairperson:** OK. If there are no other questions, thank you for your time. It is much appreciated.