



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

**Committee for Education**

**OFFICIAL REPORT  
(Hansard)**

**Preschool Education**

**22 February 2012**

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Committee for Education

### Preschool Education

**22 February 2012**

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

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)  
Mr Mike Nesbitt (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Michaela Boyle  
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson  
Mrs Brenda Hale  
Mr Trevor Lunn  
Mr Conall McDevitt  
Miss Michelle McIlveen  
Mr Daithí McKay

**Witnesses:**

Mrs Marie Abbott	Department of Education
Mr John McGrath	Department of Education
Ms Linda Wilson	Department of Education

**The Chairperson:** I welcome John, Linda and Marie. Thank you for coming. John, we have just expressed concern about your paper, which was sent to us late on Monday. In fact, it was not available to be sent to members in their pack. Today's first topic has been listed in our work programme for a number of weeks. We thought that we were getting into a better position and that the delivery of papers was getting better. However, this one was sent electronically to members late on Monday evening, and, therefore, members are just getting an opportunity to see it. Have you any idea why that was the case?

**Mr John McGrath (Department of Education):** Not specifically in this case. I apologise for the late arrival of the paper. We have discussed the matter and are endeavouring to get papers through more quickly. It was probably a product of the general pressure that we are under at the minute. However, I offer my apologies, and we will try to do our best to fill any gaps as the result of the late arrival of the paper.

**The Chairperson:** OK, John. You speak to the paper, and then members will ask questions.

**Mr McGrath:** I will ask Linda to fill that space, Chair.

**Ms Linda Wilson (Department of Education):** I will highlight a few key points. The preschool year is a non-compulsory phase of education. However, parents value that provision highly and the overall take-up is high: over 90%, and higher in some areas. Although the Department of Education (DE) has policy and budgetary responsibility for the programme, the overall planning and implementation at local level is the responsibility of preschool education advisory groups (PEAGs) in each education and library board.

The Department accords a high priority to ensuring that the preschool provision available across all sectors is of good quality and continues to raise standards, thus ensuring improvements in educational outcomes. All preschool settings, statutory and voluntary/private, have to provide an appropriate curriculum that follows the 'Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education' and are open to inspection by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI). In addition, all voluntary/private settings entering the programme are required to meet certain standards and requirements, including minimum staff qualifications, staff child ratios of 1:8 and support from a qualified teacher or early years specialist.

The Education and Training Inspectorate undertakes a rigorous programme of inspection across all types of preschool settings and continues to offer support and guidance at the points of inspection. It continues to highlight good practice through its reports, while monitoring areas for improvement. ETI reports indicate that standards continue to rise across all sectors, and there are examples of outstanding practice across the statutory and voluntary sectors.

As far as the coverage of eligible children is concerned, not all parents choose to apply for a place or take up one that is offered. Currently, no definitive numbers can be given by the boards for children whose parents have not taken up a place or remain unplaced.

In submitting an application for a funded preschool place, parents are advised to select preferences in a number of statutory and voluntary/private settings in the programme, as it is not always possible to meet parents' first preferences. However, we know that parental preference can put pressure on certain settings, and that can create an impression of insufficient places in the system. Parents who do not take advantage of the opportunity to identify a full range of preferences disadvantage themselves, as they reduce the number of settings that may be able to offer them a place. Last year, and for the first time, the education and library boards implemented a two-stage admissions process to maximise the uptake by children in their final preschool year. Overall, that appears to have been helpful in reducing the number of underage children in the system and giving target-age children the greatest choice possible.

We have co-operated closely with the boards to ensure that the appropriate number of places is available. For 2011-12, approximately 23,000 children are in preschool provision. However, we anticipate that more places will be required in 2012-13. On the basis of birth statistics, there will be approximately 25,000 children in the preschool cohort for the 2012-13 school year. The data from the boards shows that applications for approximately 22,500 children were received by the closing date, which is about 88% of the cohort. However, we also need to take account of parents who make late applications, and we estimate that there could be around 1,000 of those. That figure would increase the percentage application rate to 92.4%, which is in line with the percentage application rate of 92.7% for the 2011-12 school year.

The review that the Minister announced in January identified a number of important issues that needed to be addressed to improve the operation of the programme. It is, essentially, a framework for action. We are also considering the draft Programme for Government (PFG) commitment and how that can be implemented. The Minister has said that he wishes to proceed to amend the legislative criteria. If priority criteria are to be removed, it is important that something more appropriate and transparent is put in their place. The two DE-specified priority criteria ensure a common approach. Without the legislative criteria or an admissions code, boards of governors and management committees would have to fall back on their own sub-criteria, which can vary significantly. Therefore, the review recommends the development and issuing of a preschool admissions code to provide specific guidance on the content of admissions criteria, including the Department's expectations of the preference to be

given to particular groups of children. That will be a significant piece of work, as it will involve consultation with a range of stakeholders. If it is to provide a consistent approach to preschool admissions, it will need to be transparent and robust.

Although the preschool programme has strengths and has made significant progress since it was initiated, it is clear that a range of issues need to be addressed. The Department intends to do so, primarily by taking forward actions in the preschool review. The establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) will also be important in progressing some of those recommendations. Progressing the issue will also contribute to the delivery of the draft Programme for Government commitment, which will be a key focus for the next three years.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Marie, do you want to make any comments?

**Mrs Marie Abbott (Department of Education):** No.

**The Chairperson:** John and Linda, I want to open this up. The other day, I submitted a question to the Minister, asking him to give me a breakdown of the preschool settings that have been inspected. I requested the name of those facilities, their number of pupils, and so on. The answer that came back was that the information was not readily available and that there would be a disproportionate cost involved in providing that information. If that is the case, why are we throwing millions of pounds more at dealing with the problem of access?

I am getting increasingly concerned. Linda referred to the requirement across the sectors to have an appropriate curriculum, and she said that standards were rising. If standards are rising, why did the chief inspector highlight in his report that, particularly in the voluntary sector:

*"a high turn-over of staff and a lack of consistent and effective support from an early years specialist." ?*

Why did he also highlight in the voluntary sector:

*"lower minimum level of staff qualifications and the lack of opportunities for professional development" ?*

We must remember that the voluntary sector did not come out of that report as well as the statutory sector. When will the Department take seriously the fact that there is a problem and realise that throwing money at it is not the answer? I have put a number of questions to the Minister and the Department to ask them how they will guarantee better educational outcomes for children. Surely that is the reason why we are doing this, but how will those be measured and monitored? I think that, at the moment, the whole preschool programme seems to be about getting children places, and it does not matter where. As long as you get them in and do not have to bus them 60 miles, you have fulfilled a Programme for Government target. To be honest, if that is happening simply to attain a target, without any real benefit or better outcome, I wonder why it is being done.

**Mr McGrath:** Preschool provision is the same as any other area of the education system. It is not simply about providing places; it is about outcomes. I am not sure whether you were referring to the entire preschool sector or differentiating —

**The Chairperson:** Yes, right across the sector.

**Mr McGrath:** Preschool settings are subject to inspection by the inspectorate. I recognise the issues that you flagged up, but preschool provision is subject to the same inspection regime as applies to the rest of the education system. In the context of the Minister's commitment to drive up standards, we are no less interested in ensuring proper quality and good outcomes for children, particularly at that early stage, because everyone knows, and all the evidence suggests, that targeted investment at that

stage can make a difference later. However, I agree with you that there is no point in providing places unless they provide added value for the children involved. That is why we are very clear that simply putting money into early years is not enough. We have to make sure that it adds value.

**The Chairperson:** If we look at inspection, John, you are not inspecting like with like. The regimes, requirements and structures of staff qualifications in the statutory sector are different from those in the voluntary/private sector. Therefore, it cannot be the case that you are comparing two similar organisations. They are funded differently, and, as you well know, there is no teacher relief, which has been an ongoing issue for principals in nursery schools for a long time, but the Department has washed its hands of it. It does not seem prepared to accept that a principal in a nursery school is expected to do all the other work that he or she has to do, whereas provision for relief is made available in every other element of the education system.

You are not comparing like with like, yet, even with that caveat, the inspector's report is very clear that there is a problem. Why are we not trying to address that problem before giving additional money? That additional money is only bridging the differential, and I doubt very much whether it will bridge the differential in outcomes. Of course, we know that not all children will have the same outcome because they are all different, but how can you convince the Committee that, as a result of what the Department is doing, all children, irrespective of their preschool setting, will have the same opportunity to have the same outcome?

**Mr McGrath:** As I said, we take the same attitude to preschool standards as to the rest of the education system. Although we accept that there is a diversity of preschool provision that does not extend to later years, that does not mean that the inspection regime is not capable of catering for that and taking it into account. In the same way, the inspectorate deals with a number of institutions within and beyond our ambit and is capable of forming judgements. In the voluntary/ private sector, it can tell the difference between good and bad. Like everywhere else in the education system, wherever we are and whatever age group we cater for, we know that there is variation between those who do well and those who do not. The inspectorate's reports demonstrate that it can pick up good and bad practice. We are bearing down on wider preschool provision, and I am nearly sure that, for the first time, at least one nursery school has entered the formal intervention process. So there is evidence of the Department's bearing down. The same regime applies throughout the system. It does not matter that there is a diversity of preschool provision; it is about the standards that we apply to it.

**Ms L Wilson:** The focus of the inspection reports is very much on the children and how the children's development, involvement, behaviour and opportunities match what the inspectorate considers to be appropriate and good practice for children of that age. I am sure that the inspectorate could explain better and in more detail the sorts of issues and areas that it considers. The inspectorate reports give a very good flavour, and they give an assessment of how any particular setting is performing. I read them all, and I can see outstanding performance in all sectors and satisfactory performance in all sectors.

**The Chairperson:** I am sorry for labouring the point, but I repeatedly hear about this. The Audit Office report, 'The Pre-school Education Expansion Programme', referred to that very point:  
*"Evidence on the quality and effectiveness of the Programme and pre-school education in general is available from a number of sources. In the first place, inspection by ETI indicates that only a minimal percentage of pre-school settings fail to achieve a good/satisfactory grading in terms of ethos, management and education. However, whilst the latest Chief Inspector's Report shows that, during the period 2006-2008, over 90 per cent of the provision inspected had been graded at satisfactory or better, there has been a downward movement in the grades awarded in both the statutory and voluntary/private sectors. The Department needs to investigate and address the reasons for this decline in effectiveness in both sectors to ensure that pre-school children receive the best quality education".*  
Was that done?

**Ms L Wilson:** Yes, we have focused on improving quality in the private/community and voluntary sector. There has been a focus on addressing the issues that were identified in the Audit Office report, and I think that the statistics that are coming through show that there is an improvement. We need to look at a potential vulnerability that is starting to emerge in the quality of provision in nursery units in the statutory sector as opposed to stand-alone nursery schools, which generally show a very high standard of provision. The nursery unit in the primary school is not showing anything like the same consistent level of quality. That is a new trend that is starting to come through and one that we, as a Department, need to start focusing on.

**The Chairperson:** Have you any opinion as to why that is the case?

**Mr McGrath:** The issue of the nursery units is a late arrival.

**The Chairperson:** I accept that.

**Mr McGrath:** I have the Chief Inspector's report for 2010-11, which says that 95% of nursery schools fall into the good or outstanding category, as do 73% of private/voluntary nursery schools and 70% of nursery units, which supports the point that Linda made. Overall, it says that in 76% of preschool settings, the achievements and standards of the children were evaluated as good or better than that. In 21%, the achievements and standards were evaluated as satisfactory, and 3% were inadequate. The comparative figure for primary schools for the same period was that 74% were good or better than that, 20% were satisfactory and 6% were inadequate. Therefore, the sector is not necessarily worse off than the others. We made the point previously that we recognise from the Chief Inspector's reports that there are schools and institutions where standards are not as good as they should be, and we need to drive that up. However, I am not sure that there is any evidence that the preschool sector is any worse off than the primary sector or post-primary sector. In fact, this evidence would suggest that it is better off.

I am not sure that we have seen enough to work out the issue around nursery units. One could surmise, but I do not know enough about it. In some cases, it may well be that they are not seen as the main focus of a primary school. It may be a management issue. Quite clearly, nursery schools are not inexpensive, if I can put it like that. There is a significant investment in them. Whether, in the long term, that is the ideal model when resources are constrained is another issue. Interestingly, up until about a year ago, when you looked at the profile of surpluses, you could see that, proportionately, in comparison with overall budgets, the biggest surpluses were in nursery schools. I am not saying that they are over-funded, but the difference is quite stark. Proportionately, the biggest surpluses were in nursery schools, the next biggest were in primary schools, and the smallest were in post-primary schools.

**The Chairperson:** Before members ask questions, I would like clarification on one point. In the review that has been carried out, it seems that the Department is being asked to develop quality indicators specifically for preschool education. Why does the Department need to do that, given that ETI has already published its own documentation — I think that it is called 'Together Towards Improvement' — setting out quality indicators that are specific to preschool education? Does that not mean running the same programme again? Clearly, the Department is duplicating what has already been done by the inspectorate. Given that the inspectorate already has a quality indicator process, is there a need for it to be rehashed or reinvented by the Department?

**Ms L Wilson:** We look to the inspectorate to set and advise on quality indicators, so I am not quite sure where the reference occurs. Any quality indicators that we would set would be with the inspectorate.

**The Chairperson:** So you would take indicators from the inspectorate rather than create your own set of indicators?

**Ms L Wilson:** Yes. The Department might well set a financial or other type of indicator. However, core educational outcomes and indicators would absolutely come from ETI.

**Mrs Dobson:** I want to raise a couple of points. First, I would like to know the criteria on which the Department bases its decisions on new nursery buildings. It seems that parents in growing towns and villages really have to push the Department to recognise local need. It does not always make the right decision. Recently, I was involved with two examples in my own constituency; Orchard County Primary School and Waringstown Primary School. Practical solutions are needed. Do you take into account population shifts? Does the Department have a strategic model in place to identify trends and the need for new nursery units?

**Mr McGrath:** I will say a bit and ask Marie to give details. First, the Minister takes decisions on development proposals. The Department gives advice —

**Mrs Dobson:** But those decisions are made on your advice.

**Mr McGrath:** Yes, but the Minister takes those decisions. We do not decide one way or the other; we simply give advice to the Minister. Marie will go through the details. Our advice reflects demographics, population shifts, alternative provision, local demand, etc.

**Mrs Marie Abbott (Department of Education):** Although it is not our area, we contribute to the development proposal process, which looks at information from ETI, the early years team, finance units and the education and library boards. It also takes account of public views, because other settings can have a view on requests by one setting for new or additional services.

**Mrs Dobson:** What do you mean by public views?

**Mrs Abbott:** Any other stakeholder or parent can write into the development proposal process, so it is very open and transparent. As part of that, we would take an analysis of provision in and around the two-mile and five-mile area of a particular setting and determine whether there is a need or over-provision or under-provision. That is the kind of information that is fed back to the Minister as part of the process. We do not pull that together. A team carries out the development proposal process. A range of views is taken into account.

**Mrs Dobson:** Do you take into account such factors as population shifts and the number of young families?

**Mrs Abbott:** Those factors are often included in an education and library board's analysis, if it knows that there is new or additional pressure. We look at the level of provision in an area, and it is compared to the P1 cohort as an indicator of need in the area. If it falls below a certain level, that is flagged up. That might indicate that there is a need for additional places. That is then put forward to the Minister as part of a package of views and inputs.

**Mrs Dobson:** I know from my experience in my constituency that we had to take to the streets and gather petitions with local people. Their concerns were taken into account. The 800-odd names on the

petition made a difference. The issue is why we need to get to that point. I thought that there would be a strategy in place to identify pockets of need and to see where there are emerging villages and towns. I thought that there would be some forward planning and that you would be able to say that there would be a need for a large primary school because there was a growing population. That would do away with the need to lobby, fight and gather petitions to get to that stage.

**Mr McGrath:** In an ideal world, that would be the case. The system that we have at the minute allows anyone to come along with a development proposal. When we move further forward with ESA and area planning, you should be able to have more of that sort of strategic approach.

**Mrs Dobson:** In Waringstown, for example, minutes of a board of governors meeting in 1976 stated that they needed a nursery. That is a considerable time ago.

**Mr McGrath:** That was before my time.

**Mrs Dobson:** It was before mine, too, but it is a considerable time.

**Mr McGrath:** It is a system unlike any system anywhere else. The central plan of assessing needs, assessing where you are going to go to and working out what you would need is overtaken by a range of things. Anyone can bring forward a development proposal. In the process, therefore, we have to say, "Let us look at the demographics, let us look at local alternative provision, and let us see the views of the board, as the planning authority." We do that to a fairly sophisticated degree.

We are talking about setting up new premises that will occupy taxpayers' money. In the absence of any additional money, when additional provision comes in, everywhere else gets a little bit less in order to accommodate that. It is a serious decision. I can understand that advocates will have their own views on it, but it is a serious decision to set up a new public service institution that could be there for 20 or 30 years. When you encapsulate that, you can see that it is a significant investment decision. You need to be able to validate that there is a need, that it will be sustainable and that there is no alternative provision there. We will probably look at those more critically in the future.

We do it in a very sophisticated way, and we do it based on the most up-to-date information. We had a glitch recently when the Minister was not given up-to-date information on a development proposal. As a result, he had to revisit it and make a different decision. Through faults in the Department, he was not presented with the up-to-date information. That shows the degree of sophistication we bring to this. In that instance, it was a bit cack-handed, but it got to the right place in the end.

**Mrs Dobson:** We had to use parent power in Waringstown. We had to take to the streets to lobby and gather a petition. I thought that there would be a strategy in place.

Last week's research briefing on the draft PFG preschool commitment highlighted a lack of detail on how the Programme for Government target can be met. Is there a sense in the Department that issues such as that and school budget concerns can be resolved with a potential financial windfall from selling off school estates following the Minister's viability audit?

**Mr McGrath:** As regards the viability audit, we are nowhere near deciding that we are going to be closing places and selling off schools.

**Mrs Dobson:** I said "potential".

**Mr McGrath:** It is a long way off. The viability audit has given us a snapshot of a number of schools that are facing stress. In many cases, the solutions could well be to reinvigorate those schools or have amalgamations or changes in leadership. It is a long way off deciding that there is a list of schools that are going to close. Equally, in the current market, you would not get much anyway.

**Mrs Dobson:** What about the lack of detail on how the draft PFG target could be met?

**Mr McGrath:** The consultation on the draft Programme for Government is ending. We will be submitting some comments to the Minister on what the final commitments might be and, therefore, on what the milestones towards that are. I think that we are reasonably clear about what we would be expected to do and how we would go about doing it.

**Ms L Wilson:** The Department is currently looking at the underlying detail of what we need to do to make that commitment. The PFG will always contain quite a high-level milestone because of the enormous range of issues that lies underneath it. It is not simply about making more places available, reaching out to parents who do not apply to the programme or handling late applications. There is a whole raft of issues, and we are currently looking at the types of things we will have to investigate. The milestones will be quite high level, but further detail will be underlying that.

**Mrs Dobson:** Will the potential of closing schools across Northern Ireland make it easier or harder to meet that draft PFG target?

**Mr McGrath:** I am not sure of the connection between closing schools and meeting the PFG target.

**Mrs Dobson:** I am referring to the lack of detail. I will repeat my question: is there a sense in the Department that issues such as this and school budget concerns can be resolved by a potential windfall from selling off school estates?

**Mr McGrath:** I have not seen that paper. In the current economic context, no one is getting windfalls from selling anything. We have property that is notionally surplus and which we cannot get sold because there is no demand for it. A windfall tends to be interpreted as getting an awful lot more from something than you expected, so there are unlikely to be windfalls. It takes some time to sell, and any windfalls would be in capital. Most of the issues that we have with expansion are on the revenue side. As regards the demand that we have at the minute and the need to ensure that we fulfil the commitment, we do not see that as an impossible demand, even in the current resource position.

**Mr McDevitt:** Sorry, I needed to step outside, but I was following the meeting on the monitor. How, specifically, does the draft Programme for Government commitment differ from what is already in place?

**Mr McGrath:** It does not differ too much, to be honest.

**Mr McDevitt:** So what is there that is materially new in the draft Programme for Government commitment?

**Mr McGrath:** It reiterates that the Executive's objective is to ensure that a year of preschool education is available to those who want it and to ensure that we deliver that in total.

**Mr McDevitt:** What, specifically, new or extra do you intend to do to ensure that you are able to deliver that in total?

**Mr McGrath:** We will ratchet up our efforts to ensure that we get to 100% as much as possible. We will ensure that we get the right balance between supply and demand in the number of places and geographical location. We rehearsed that when some of those issues arose last year. We had a two-stage application process, and, over time, we will look at how that operates. We will look at the resource implications, particularly for next year, and we may come to that in the second session of the meeting. We will look at the resources that we need to put in place, subject to the Minister's agreement, to ensure that resourcing is not an issue.

**Mr McDevitt:** How, specifically, will you do that? Clearly, in the past few years, there have been problems, and the system has not found its equilibrium. Therefore, what will happen this year that has not happened in the past?

**Mr McGrath:** We have got closer and closer to meeting full demand.

**Ms L Wilson:** It is over 90%, and, in some areas, it is 100%.

**Mr McGrath:** Yes, we are very close. It is about keeping at that to get to the point where you are hitting as near to 100% as possible.

**Mr McDevitt:** That is not the draft Programme for Government commitment. The draft Programme for Government commitment is that every child will get a place, and that is what the Minister keeps saying in the House.

**Mr McGrath:** That is what we will aim to do.

**Mr McDevitt:** So you are saying that just by following the current policies and procedures and doing what you are doing better, you will get us to that point.

**Mr McGrath:** No, I am saying that the policy objective is largely the same. We will put more emphasis on the regime that has been put together to ensure delivery of the Programme for Government, which springs from the First Minister and deputy First Minister and moves down across the whole system. That will hold us to account to ensure that we will deliver on the target of 100% as quickly as possible.

**Mr McDevitt:** This debate is a bit like the debate about food globally. I presume that you believe that there is enough food in the world to feed everyone.

**Mr McGrath:** I am not qualified to comment on that.

**Mr McDevitt:** You do not have an opinion on whether we have enough food in the world to feed everyone?

**Mr McGrath:** I am not here to answer questions about that, but, if there is, it may well be that it is not always in the right place.

**Mr McDevitt:** Absolutely, John, and that is why there are famines and food shortages in the Horn of Africa. This debate is turning into one of those arguments. Yes, we all want to eliminate global hunger, but we cannot quite take the necessary steps to do it, and, in the same way, we tolerate 10% of kids not getting a place.

**Mr McGrath:** It is not 10%.

**Mr McDevitt:** You just said that it was 10%.

**Mr McGrath:** We are saying that, in some areas, we are hitting 100%, and, in other areas, it is about 90%. That is fairly close. We are looking at the experience from last year, but, as we said, the figures on parents whose children did not get placed are not entirely accurate. Linda might want to share some views.

**Ms L Wilson:** There are areas in which we need to do a bit more work. We need to look at parents who do not apply for a place for their children, and there are a number of them. We also need to look at parents who drop off during the application process and find out why that is. We need to look at the cohort, and, if there are barriers to application, we need to address those. Once people come into the application process, we need to make sure that it works better for them so that they get the places at the end.

**Mr McDevitt:** I have one final point. We received a letter in our tabled papers today that was headed "School Starting Age" but was actually about nursery places. Is that a Freudian slip? Where is your mind at on school starting age at the moment? Do you want us to move to a higher starting age?

**Mr McGrath:** It is not an issue that the Minister is actively looking at at the minute.

**Mr McDevitt:** So there is no work being done in the Department on that?

**Mr McGrath:** Not that I am aware of. I know that the Minister's predecessor had strong views that kids started school too early. It is not an issue that the Minister is actively looking at at the minute. It is quite strategic: if you do something, the implications of changing that are that you will have to work your way through the whole system. I think that we maybe have enough on at the minute.

**Mr McDevitt:** It could really challenge the policy in a quite fundamental way.

**Mr McGrath:** Yes.

**Mr McDevitt:** So we could maybe just leave everything as it is and manage the children aged three to four in this informal way.

**Mrs Abbott:** The review of preschool admissions was about improving the system to improve the take-up, the process and the experience for parents, and we will address that within the Programme for

Government framework. Research was done last year to identify, based on the returns made at P1, children who apparently had not had a preschool experience. That survey is available. It turned out that a number of the children listed as "preschool", "no preschool" or "unknown" were incorrect returns. So the survey drilled down and ended up getting responses from about 191 parents who had not taken up a place for their child, and the results were very interesting. The reasons given in the returns to the Department were, primarily, that it did not suit their personal circumstances. They had made that choice, and it may be that, in certain situations, if people's children are already attending a playgroup or the parents feel that the children are very young, they make that as a positive choice rather than it being seen as a deficit in the system. It may also be a deficit in the system, but it is not primarily that.

**The Chairperson:** Before we move on, I welcome friends of Dolores Kelly who are with us in the Public Gallery. Thank you for coming; I hope that you enjoy your stay with us.

**Mr Nesbitt:** John, you quoted figures of 70% and 76% for "good", "very good" and whatnot. I cannot find them. Are they not in the briefing paper?

**Mr McGrath:** I suspect not.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Why not? Are they not useful?

**Mr McGrath:** That is a good question. This is a report on the 2010-11 inspections carried out by the inspectorate, which it produced for internal purposes. I thought that it was useful to quote from that, because the tenor of the earlier discussion somehow suggested that elements of the preschool sector are substandard and others are not. I was just trying to make the point that the standards may well be better than in other sectors. I am quite happy to share that information.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I would have been happy to see it in the briefing paper. I consider it to be key.

**Mr McGrath:** I take the point, particularly since it would have been helpful to us.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I will go back to where Conall was. Linda, I think you said that there is a 90% take-up of preschool places, but John is now saying that that may not be accurate.

**Ms L Wilson:** What is the overall figure, Marie? Is 97% our estimate?

**Mrs Abbott:** It is 94%. It varies in different years.

**Mr Nesbitt:** When you drill down into it, what percentage of those who take up a place are satisfied? What is your information on that?

**Mrs Abbott:** The ETI inspection reports include a component for parental views. They ask parents to give a view, and those views are recorded uniformly. People tend to value the service and think that they get a very good service. That is a feature of the ETI reporting mechanism.

**Mr Nesbitt:** What percentage of parents get their first choice?

**Ms L Wilson:** I do not have that figure. Could we get that?

**Mrs Abbott:** We could ask the boards to provide that, but I can give you an example. If a school with 52 places receives between 80 and 90 first-preference applications, that indicates that that school is very popular. However, in the area around that school there will be other schools and preschool settings with capacity that will pick up second, third and subsequent preferences. It is a preference rather than a choice.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I am interested in what percentage of parents get their first choice. What percentage of parents do not complete all of their preferences? Linda, you said that that was disadvantageous to them.

**Ms L Wilson:** Again, I do not have that detail.

**Mr Nesbitt:** In your submission, you said that:  
*"While pre-school education is valued by parents, some may choose not to apply or may choose not to take up a place offered because it does not suit their individual circumstances".*  
What does that last phrase mean?

**Mrs Abbott:** The survey that was carried out last year showed that some parents may already have their children in a day care preschool setting. If they are working parents who cannot get a setting that that day care setting picks up from, they may opt not to take up the opportunity of a place because it would not suit their personal circumstances or their arrangements for the collection of their children. Likewise, the parents of children who are looked after by a grandparent may wish to put their children into only a limited number of settings. If they do not get those settings, they may make the decision not to take a place because it does not suit them.

**Mr Nesbitt:** Is that information anecdotal or statistical?

**Mrs Abbott:** It would be anecdotal. However, there is also statistical information in the survey returns. The report on the survey is short, and, if you are interested, we could make it available to the Committee.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I am not going to bang on about it, but the report came to us late, and I do not see a lot of statistics in the analysis. From my point of view, those statistics would be particularly useful.

Returning to Conall's point, your primary statutory duty is to educate the people of Northern Ireland; it is not to educate 90% of the people of Northern Ireland. That is my bottom line.

**Mr McGrath:** Preschool education is not statutory education, and the commitment is to make it available to those who want it. If some people decide for domestic or other reasons that they do not want to take up a place, that is their choice.

**Mr Nesbitt:** You have not given me robust statistics that show that you have gone as far as you can. You have a statutory duty; that is in law and it is on the front page of your website. In your view, you may have gone as far as you can, but I am not convinced of that.

**Mr McGrath:** Let us be clear: we do not have a statutory duty to provide preschool education. We have said that there is a government commitment —

**Mr Nesbitt:** You have a statutory duty to promote the education of the people of Northern Ireland.

**Mr McGrath:** Yes; otherwise we would not be doing this at all, but the commitment is to provide preschool education to 100% of those who want it. There are some people who do not appear at all, who perhaps have their own domestic arrangements and are well enough off to do that. It may be difficult to work out what the full demand is. It is different in a statutory setting. Every child must go to primary school, and we know what the demand is.

**Mr Nesbitt:** I will not labour the point, but I look on the Department as a business and the parents and pupils as the customers. I am looking for a more robust statistical analysis of customer satisfaction, customer views and why customers do or do not do things. That is all that I am saying.

**Mr McGrath:** Those are fair points, and some more numbers in the paper would have helped. We will take that away and look at it.

**Mr McDevitt:** It is worth noting that the Department and the Minister are refusing to give every child aged three the statutory right to a place, which is not the same as making it compulsory for them to take up that place.

I think that the system would respond in a much better, robust and thorough way if legislation installed the right of a child to a place. For whatever reason, however, that is considered not to be a priority.

**Mr McGrath:** The issue may be that it is not entirely clear that we need to move to a statutory right.

**Mr McDevitt:** Are you saying that with a straight face, John?

**Mr McGrath:** It is important that people do not lose sight of the balance. The vast majority of families who want a preschool place already get one. Your point was about ensuring that the right places are in the right place. There will always be fine-tuning in any system, and we will work through that. It would be some achievement if 100% of those who wanted a preschool place had one. Very few 100% targets are achieved. If, for good reasons, people do not want to step forward to avail themselves of the offer of a place, that is not necessarily a failure of the system. They, to use Mike's expression, are the customers, and if they choose not to come into that market, that is their choice.

**Mr Lunn:** It is not normal for the Committee to be kind to the Department. However, I see this as something of a success story. If I remember correctly, the figures that we received last week were along the lines of what Mike is looking for. I think that only about 3% of parents who wanted a preschool place in their locality did not get one. We are not absolutely sure what happened to them: they may have gone elsewhere or decided not to bother. Surely, as you said, John, achieving 100% in a non-compulsory system would be very difficult. A statutory right is all very well, but it must be hard to match demand to supply in a non-compulsory system for which you do not know what the demand will be from one year to the next.

I would never challenge inspectors. They are experts in their field, and I am sure that they do a great job. However, I wonder how they assess the achievement of a four-year-old. Do figures claiming that 70% to 90% of preschool settings are good or excellent take into account some measure of assessment of the children's achievements throughout the year? Frankly, I do not know how you

would do that. In my opinion, four-year-old children should be allowed to play. I would have thought that the real assessment of how effective preschool provision has been would be when children are aged five or six.

Preschool provision is part-time or full-time and voluntary or statutory. It is non-compulsory, and the children range from the age of three. Therefore, it must be a nightmare to assess performance. Is there any evidence of a difference in attainment when children get to, say, age six, or whatever the first level of formal assessment might be, between children who went to a voluntary playgroup, a statutory nursery school, a nursery unit and those who attended none of those? Is there any quantifiable difference in their achievements as they grow slightly older?

**Mr McGrath:** I do not know whether we have that analysis, Trevor, but I will enquire whether that is available. I suspect that, unless kids are tracked through the system, once they move into primary school, we are not too sure whether whatever assessment is done there is linked back to their preschool experience. However, I will pursue the issue because it would be interesting to find out.

**Mr Lunn:** We have a lot of statistics on underachievement, particularly at transfer age. That argument rages on, but it should not be too difficult to backtrack from that and find out whether children received preschool education and, if so, in what setting.

**The Chairperson:** Trevor, do you remember the presentation to the Committee at its meeting in Limavady? We will get the information back again, but I am nearly sure that the lady who gave the presentation said that, in England, there was evidence that, if a child attended a poor facility — I do not know whether those were broken down into statutory or voluntary facilities — there was an adverse outcome. There is information about that, and we can try to get it. The worry is about how to ensure that preschool provision, wherever it is located, is allocated equitably and fairly. I am worried about certain proposals, which we will come to in a moment. I will let members come in with their queries, but I want to park the issue of the legislative changes that may be required.

**Ms Boyle:** Thank you for your presentation. I hope that you will be able to answer my question, which some nursery school classroom assistants asked me to put to you. There is a focus on raising standards in preschool settings and on early intervention and the special educational needs (SEN) review. The voluntary/private providers must employ the services of a qualified teacher and an early years specialist. Some classroom assistants are questioning their qualifications and wondering whether they will be required to have specialist early years and SEN qualifications. Some are qualified as classroom assistants but do not have those qualifications.

**Mr McGrath:** In other words, they are concerned about proposals emerging from the SEN review.

**Ms Boyle:** Yes.

**Mr McGrath:** Michaela, I do not know. I will look at that and come back to you. I have not had sight of that.

**Ms Boyle:** It is because of the emphasis on raising standards in preschool settings that the question has been raised of whether they will have to gain more qualifications to meet the requirement for early years provision. If that is the case, I would appreciate your coming back to me, John. Qualified classroom assistants need to know about that now. They will need to be prepared in the face of rising demand for preschool places.

**Mr McGrath:** If we require people to upskill, we will have to look at the resource consequences of that and put the necessary programmes in place. We will come back to you about that. I do not know whether you want us to respond to Michaela, Chairperson, or whether we should write to the Committee Clerk.

**Ms Boyle:** Perhaps you would write to the Committee.

**The Chairperson:** Is that OK?

**Ms Boyle:** Yes, thank you, Chairperson.

**Mr McKay:** I want to ask about full-time and part-time places. One of the policy actions from the review mentions the implications of standardising the duration of preschool provision. I cannot find the figures in your paper. What percentage of schools/units are full-time and what percentage are part-time? What percentage of the overall number of children in the system are in full-time or part-time provision?

**Ms L Wilson:** All full-time provision is in the statutory sector, and that breaks down into almost 9,000 full-time and approximately 5,500 part-time places. There are about 8,300 places in the voluntary/private sector.

**Mr McKay:** So there are more part-time places, especially in the 382 voluntary/private sector settings.

**Mr McGrath:** Those figures are on page 7 of our paper, Daithí.

**Mr McKay:** The primary purpose of preschool provision is education, but parents also use it as a child-minding service. It frees parents up to go back into employment and try to work around their schedules, which has already been referred to. Do you have any idea what statutory or full-time provision is available in the most deprived areas in the North compared with the more affluent areas?

**Mr McGrath:** I suspect that we do not have that analysis.

**Mrs Abbott:** Not completely, but we had a look at that a couple of years ago, and most of the provision in neighbourhood renewal areas was full-time, and only a handful of schools offered a mix of provision.

**Mr McKay:** May we have that analysis for our information?

**Mr McGrath:** Yes. It is an interesting analysis. Wider work on the childcare strategy is being led by the First Minister and deputy First Minister. It touches on issues such as the boundary between educating kids and enabling parents to enter the workforce. Therefore, we are looking at some of those issues in that context anyway, but we will look up that analysis.

**Mr McKay:** I have one final question. I know that some education stakeholders put more emphasis on full-time and statutory provision than on the voluntary/private sector. What is the breakdown in some of those sectors? I know that the Irish-medium sector has a lower percentage of statutory provision than other sectors, but do you have those figures to hand?

**Mrs Abbott:** We do not have them to hand, but we have answered the same query from some MLAs, so we can access the information easily. The percentage of children in Irish-medium settings in the statutory sector has increased because of the number of Irish-medium settings created since April 2010, but we can get the figures if you need them.

**The Chairperson:** I want to go back to the issue of full-time and part-time places. The Department's document states that part-time provision is between two and a half hours and four and a half hours, but that is not the case. Part-time provision in the statutory sector is only two and a half hours. Why was an attempt made to say that it was longer? Some sectors have raised serious concerns about the issue. The part-time provision funded by the Department is only two and a half hours. How did the Department come up with four and a half hours in its document?

**Mr McGrath:** The paper states that part-time preschool provision in the statutory sector is defined in legislation as being between two and a half hours and four and a half hours per day. Full-time provision is at least four and a half hours a day.

**Mrs Abbott:** The practice is that a preschool place is funded for two and a half hours, but the legislative context is slightly different.

**The Chairperson:** When the Minister came to the House to announce the review of preschool admissions arrangements, he said that the review had also identified some significant policy issues, which will require detailed further consideration and investigation before deciding how they could be handled. What are those issues?

**Ms L Wilson:** Part-time versus full-time provision is one that springs immediately to mind. Others relate to the outworking of certain changes that might be made. For example, if we used legislative change to take two-year-olds out of the system, we would need to think about whether something might be lost. If we removed reception places, we would have to ensure that preschool places were available for children who had previously taken up a reception rather than a preschool place.

**The Chairperson:** The other issue is the redefining of disadvantage. Many working parents are very concerned about how they can access services. No one will decry, or in any way demean, families who face difficult times. However, it seems as though the shift is aimed more at trying to deal with that element of the problem than achieving a balance that ensures that all parents have access to services, whether they are from areas of social and economic disadvantage, or low-income families, who are the working poor and get a very raw deal from society generally.

The other day, I heard a horrendous story about a certain individual. I will not say where the story is set or what their social background is, but that individual was claiming over £1,100 a week in benefit. There is something badly wrong with a system that allows that to happen. The individual's children were getting access to every possible service available. I have no issue with families' needs being met, but I think that, as a society, we need to have a fair system. The issue of equality has gone completely AWOL. Perhaps we are beginning to see the real issue of equality of access. Is the Department considering legislation that will tell us how it is will define social disadvantage? Free school meals have, to be honest, become a very blunt instrument, and many people are highly sceptical about using them as a measure of social disadvantage.

**Mr McGrath:** Are you talking about access to preschool or more widely?

**The Chairperson:** I am talking about access to preschool, because the Minister referred to amending the criteria for that.

**Ms L Wilson:** The first key question that we have to consider is whether we want to retain some form of legislative criteria at all. They have advantages and disadvantages. If the Minister wants to retain them, what should they look like? Are they a measure of social disadvantage, and, if so, how are they expressed?

The other underlying issue is how we achieve fairness across the system when individual preschool settings, boards of governors or management committees could then set their own sub-criteria, which would vary hugely. The other side of that would be to have a pre-admissions code. It is up to individual boards of governors to set their own criteria, but perhaps the Department should offer criteria that it has drawn up in consultation with stakeholders and which it would expect to guide admissions. Otherwise, an individual child trying to access different preschool settings may score badly under every facility's criteria because those criteria are always different. We need to think about the legislative criteria and the terms in which those are couched to meet the objectives of the Minister and the Department.

**The Chairperson:** Has any more thought been given to having an admissions code?

**Ms L Wilson:** No. That needs to sit alongside a decision in principle on the legislation, because what would go into legislation would be the overriding criteria, underlying which would be the admissions code. That will be a significant piece of work because individual settings and schools have set their own criteria, and they are probably quite attached to them.

**The Chairperson:** John, where does all of that sit in relation to early years? There is a 0-6 strategy somewhere and all this preschool provision. The Minister's statement to the House referred to it. Will the preschool review feed into the final decision on early years?

**Mr McGrath:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** So it will sit as part of the overall early years provision, not separately?

**Mr McGrath:** It will be wrapped up. Some of the issues that the Minister mentioned, such as having a standard preschool product, need to be looked at in more detail, and they will be picked up in the early years strategy one way or another. The early years strategy will pick up the wider policies that emerge and provide an overall context for preschool provision.

**The Chairperson:** Have you any indication of where we are with early years?

**Mr McGrath:** We are doing a lot of work on that. We have had to rejig resources, but we hope to bring something forward before too long.

**Ms L Wilson:** We hope to have completed our analysis of the consultation within a few weeks. We will need time to consider how a lot of the issues that emerged from that will be addressed. As we said before, many major issues are emerging, and we are scheduled to talk to you about that next week.

**The Chairperson:** Yes. You are coming back to the Committee next week.

My final point is on the budgetary process. An additional £1.4 million was allocated specifically to one sector: the private/ community sector. I was very concerned that, after we set the budget for education, the Minister came along and gave an additional £1.4 million to a particular sector, albeit for the reason that he set out, which was to try to deal with the differential between the settings. In future years, will we ensure that the budget will be set and that those in the system will know exactly what their allocation will be, irrespective of where they come from or who they are?

**Mr McGrath:** Ideally, yes.

**The Chairperson:** The answer cannot be, "Ideally, yes." Is it yes or no? You could end up with a two-tier funding system. Funding Decisions could be made outside the budgetary process that allocates money. The statutory sector is part and parcel of wider educational provision. I noticed in your paper several references to preschool education being "non-sectoral". What does that mean?

**Mrs Abbott:** It is seen that places are open to all children. At the start of the programme, provision was linked to maintained or controlled schools. Many in the voluntary/private sector were not clearly aligned with any setting. Therefore, it is regarded that all places are open to applications from all children.

**The Chairperson:** Does that apply across the piece, including the statutory sector?

**Mrs Abbott:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** John, is there a risk that we will end up funding preschool education in the way that I described?

**Mr McGrath:** I am not sure whether I have grasped what that risk is. Clearly —

**The Chairperson:** An additional £1.4 million was allocated outside of the budgetary process. Statutory provision has had to take cuts and hits in the overall budget process, which we will discuss in the next session. Therefore, will you end up having two different approaches to how you fund overall preschool educational provision?

**Ms L Wilson:** Was that the £1.4 million for the uplift — the equalisation of funding?

**The Chairperson:** Yes.

**Ms L Wilson:** That was, in fact, included in the budget from the outset. The Minister simply announced it very late in the year.

**The Chairperson:** OK, so it was included.

**Ms L Wilson:** Yes. It was included; it was not new money.

**The Chairperson:** OK. Thank you, Linda and Marie. John is staying with us for the next session.