



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

The Pre-School Education in Schools
(Admissions Criteria) (Amendment)
Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

6 June 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Mervyn Storey (Chairperson)
Mr Danny Kinahan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Michaela Boyle
Mr Jonathan Craig
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mrs Brenda Hale
Mr Trevor Lunn
Miss Michelle McIlveen
Mr Daithí McKay
Mr Sean Rogers

Witnesses:

Mrs Marie Abbott	Department of Education
Mrs Julie Stephenson	Department of Education
Miss Linda Wilson	Department of Education

The Chairperson: We will now receive a presentation from Linda Wilson, the director of families and communities; Julie Stephenson, head of the youth and schools in the community team; and Marie Abbott, head of the early years team.

Linda, Marie and Julie, thank you for coming to this morning's Committee meeting. I apologise for running late. This is an important issue, which has engendered a considerable degree of interest over the past number of weeks. Linda, you can begin with a few comments, and Committee members can then ask questions.

Miss Linda Wilson (Department of Education): Before I begin, I thank the Committee for making time to consider this matter at short notice. Committee members have been provided with a further briefing paper on the proposed amendments and a copy of the draft statutory rule.

The proposed amendment to the regulations will remove the requirement for preschool education providers to give priority in their admissions process to children with birthdays in July or August in their immediate preschool year. The legislation, as amended, will continue to require providers to give priority to children from socially disadvantaged circumstances who are in their final preschool year, followed by priority to all other children in their final preschool year. Providers will also continue to have the option to give priority to children with special educational needs over other children, except those from socially disadvantaged circumstances.

The Department acknowledges that it is not ideal to bring forward this amendment in isolation from the other legislative actions that have been identified. However, as the removal of the July/August criterion can be carried out independently of the other actions and within a shorter time frame, the Minister has concluded that it is important to effect this change as soon as possible in order to provide equality of opportunity for all children who wish to access preschool provision in future years.

In June 2004, the Department carried out a formal consultation on the review of preschool education. Ninety five per cent of those who responded to the question about the July/August birthday criterion were supportive of its removal. It was also one of 17 actions recommended in the 2012 review of preschool admissions procedures. We have also consulted informally with key stakeholders through the mechanism of the early years stakeholder advisory group, which is broadly supportive of the amendment being made.

The Department recognises that parents of those children with July/August birthdays may take a different view. However, the fact is that the criterion is no longer appropriate or defensible in the current context. When the July/August birthday criterion was originally introduced, the level of preschool provision stood at around 45%. It was introduced because of concerns that if those children failed to secure a preschool place, they would not have any educational experience until after their fifth birthday, when they began primary school. There is now broadly sufficient provision to meet demand for preschool places. Evidence now also suggests that the July/August criterion may in fact have a detrimental impact on younger children by providing preferential access to preschool education to their older peers, who are already at an advantage in their educational progress.

The Department carried out an equality impact screening exercise, which identified no adverse impacts on any of the section 75 groups. In fact, the change will provide a more level playing field for children who access preschool provision. The Department will of course monitor the impact of the policy change following implementation. The intention is to make the statutory rule and lay it before the Assembly by 15 June. Subject to the will of the Assembly, the provisions will come into operation with effect from 6 July, thus ensuring that the changes are implemented in time for the commencement of the 2013-14 preschool process. The Department will also provide guidance on how the new provisions should be reflected in any criteria being applied by preschool education providers.

The Chairperson: Thank you, Linda. In the briefing paper, you state:

"there is now broadly sufficient provision to meet demand for pre-school provision".

How can the Department, in all seriousness, continue to hold that as a view, given the fact that it will say that you may live in Ballymoney, but you will have to go to Larne for preschooling? Broadly, when the 17 recommendations came out, I knew that concern has been raised about the July/August birthday criterion. Now, I hear more concern being raised about it.

I am totally opposed to the Department still persisting with the priority being given to children from socially disadvantaged circumstances. No thought has been given to working parents or to families who are facing equal financial challenges. The Department is saying that they are not a priority, and it will ask parents to drive 45 or 50 miles, because its position is one of "priority of access". If the Department used that criterion for admissions to post-primary schools, we would not be having a debate today about whether we should have academic selection.

The Department seems to use a different criterion when it suits, depending on the argument that it wants to use. You are not allowed to travel miles to the school of your choice, because that is not good, so you have to go to your local school. However, the Department then turns around and says that the issue for preschool provision is one of priority of access and encourages parents to travel 45 or 50 miles. Linda, it worries me that this is becoming a bit more like the early years provision. That is in a mess, and we do not know where it is at. Here we have an opportunity for the Department to do what it did on special educational needs, which was to listen genuinely to people's concerns and not say, as the Minister does, that 94% of people have provision, so forget about the other 6% and let them wither on the vine. We accept that advances in preschool provision have been made, but I see nothing in this paper that addresses the access issues of working parents or single parents who work. It seems that we are hanging our hat on the phrase "socially disadvantaged" and that it is the panacea for everything. You are now creating another disadvantaged group, and because the people in it cannot tick the boxes, they will remain disadvantaged. The Department's reaction to that is to say that that is tough. Linda, speaking as a Member of the Assembly, I will not subscribe to the regulations as they stand. At some point, we need to take a stand with the Department on these issues. I cannot

accept the regulations as they stand, because I do not think that they will address the needs of parents.

Miss L Wilson: This change to the regulations is essentially the first step in a process. First, the criteria for "socially disadvantaged", as they stand in the regulations, are out of date and need to be amended.

Secondly, in amending them, we will need to have a much wider exercise and look more broadly at what the right criteria are. There is strong evidence that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and homes with a low socio-economic rating start school behind and stay behind throughout their academic career. You see that coming through eventually in GCSE results, and even 'Effective Pre-school Provision in Northern Ireland' (EPPNI), a study into early years provision, showed very clearly that children from more disadvantaged homes start school from a poorer level and continue at a poorer level. As they go through school, they still do less well, particularly in English and mathematics, the two subjects that we are looking at. There is strong research evidence and strong educational evidence that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds need additional help. You will all be familiar with the early years research evidence that shows how important the early years are. Therefore, from research and evidence, there is an issue around socially disadvantaged circumstances, and, moving forward to look more broadly at the legislation, we need to look at that and at how we enable those children to come through.

There may be other issues that will also need to be looked at when we come to review the rest of the regulations. I take your point about the question of what is an acceptable preschool place for a child. The Department does not consider it a suitable preschool place if what the parent is being offered requires a significant amount of travel. A parent is never offered a place: parents apply for places, so the place that they get is a place that they chose to apply for. In practical terms, if the only setting that has places were a significant distance away, I would not consider that to be an acceptable option. I would not consider the Department to be meeting the Programme for Government (PFG) target unless we were able to tell parents that there was a setting within a reasonable distance. We are not hiding behind saying that having a place 60 miles away is an option.

To sum up, I am seized of the point that you make about a reasonable travelling distance for children. I feel very strongly about that, too. The other thing is that there is evidence for socially disadvantaged circumstances that we, in reframing the regulations, will need to look at more widely than we have done in the past. There will be full consultation around that. The step to address July/August birthdays is just one step in a process.

Mrs Dobson: Linda, I have met so many constituents — parents and grandparents — who are sickened by the preschool process year after year. I believe that many were further sickened by the Minister's comments on 2 June, when he said that the vast majority of applications had been granted. Those comments, as the Chairperson touched on, were very insensitive to the people whose children did not get places, the majority of whom are working parents. We need to look at why half of those who were turned down in the first instance did not reapply. You spoke about parents choosing a place. Many chose a place close to their home but did not get it and simply dropped off the radar. This issue came to the Committee last year, and we have it now again. What are you going to say to the parents across Northern Ireland whose children did not get their places?

All our offices have been inundated with parents who received rejection letters. That was as good as the Department came up with for many of them. What are you and the boards giving to the applicants who were turned down? Is a letter it? Do they just drop off the system? What else are you doing? I hear no evidence of how we are going to look after those children who, as I said before, basically drop off the radar once they do not get their choice. Over half just fell out of the system. When I was first appointed to the Committee last year, I asked what happens to those parents, and nobody was able to tell me. Can you tell me what has happened to those children this year?

Miss L Wilson: It is very important that parents name additional choices and stay in the process so that additional places or whatever can be brought on. A number of parents do not. Last year, over 600 parents did not choose to name additional places.

Mrs Dobson: Then it is inaccurate to say that the vast majority of applications were granted when so many were not. People basically fell out of the system.

Miss L Wilson: Well, it was 600 out of 23,000 applications, so it is still the vast majority. I strongly take your point: 600-odd children did not stay in the system. The Minister is clear that if parents do not continue to apply, the Department cannot officially work with them. Nevertheless, the boards have continued to try to find places —

Mrs Dobson: Are you monitoring this year to find out where those children go or what happens to them? You did not do that last year.

Miss L Wilson: We will monitor them this year.

Mrs Dobson: You did not last year.

Miss L Wilson: No, we did not last year, but we will monitor them this year, in as much as we can because the parents dropped out. Quite often, the children disappear or get places elsewhere. They do not —

Mrs Dobson: Is that not very worrying that they seem to disappear?

Miss L Wilson: It is worrying. I regard those 689 children as children for whom we need to try to make places available. My point is that, if the parents stick with the process and name further settings, that enables us to see more clearly where the demand is and to explore the option of making further places available. This year, the Minister —

Mrs Dobson: Many who stick with the process — the Chairperson spoke about this earlier — are offered places 20 or 30 miles away from their home.

Miss L Wilson: They have been sent letters by the boards that indicate, for speed, all the settings that still may have places in the board area.

Mrs Dobson: Many are well out of their area.

Miss L Wilson: Yes, they are. I do not think that the letter in the past has made it clear enough that it is for convenience. It is not saying to parents that we expect them to apply. The difficult —

Mrs Dobson: But that is why they fall out of the system. They do not get their choice close by and are then offered places far away. It is inevitable that they will fall out of the system. David McNarry presented to us earlier, and he said that many are paying as much as their mortgage to place their children in private nurseries. That was very worrying for the Committee to hear.

Miss L Wilson: As you know, we deliver the programme through the education and library boards (ELBs). We have met officials several times, because the Minister has been very clear this year that, if the boards can make proposals for flexible or innovative solutions for places where there are not enough, he is willing to look them. It is very important for those parents to stay engaged so that the boards can identify where there is a shortfall of places. As I said, it is not acceptable to offer a place to a child 20 or 30 miles away. I genuinely believe that. That is not offering a place.

Mrs Dobson: So what help is there beyond the rejection letter? What is the board doing to address that?

Miss L Wilson: Well, again, we look to the boards and transfer officers. There are teams which do that. I know that they have worked with parents because they have continued to try to place parents, but we rely on boards. Certainly, how we strengthen the process is something that we can look at for next year, finding out why those parents dropped out and looking at ways to engage with them.

Mrs Dobson: Can you guarantee that, next year, we will not again be in the situation of debating why half of the applicants did not reapply?

Miss L Wilson: I cannot guarantee it. All I can say is that I will shortly be meeting with the education and library boards about next year's process and this is one of the issues that will be on the agenda: how we keep parents engaged and liaise with them. I will keep pressing. We will try to do our best.

Mrs Dobson: Surely there are lessons to be learned? If this were about primary one there would be an outrage, but because it is preschool, it does not seem to be important to the board.

Miss L Wilson: I cannot comment on that. We have had several meetings with them. We have tried to improve. We have pressed for action to be taken. The Minister has made it clear that he is willing to look at any solution that is brought to him by the board. You say that lessons should be learned; yes, absolutely. I plan to meet with the boards very shortly so that we can start to look, while it is very fresh in our minds, at what worked this year, what did not work and what steps we need to take. The process kicks off, effectively, in September. Certainly, things come to my mind about making our documentation clearer. Yes, we will be meeting to reflect on the process with a view to learning lessons.

Mrs Dobson: It is very insensitive. Just a rejection letter and that is it: they are left in limbo.

Mr Lunn: We seem to have got off the subject a bit here. We are talking about July and August. As far as I remember, in response to a private Member's motion, just a month or two ago, the Assembly voted in favour of this change. I mean no offence to you, Chairman, but I do not recall anyone speaking against it. Maybe my recollection is not good.

I think it is to be welcomed. It is nice. There has been a campaign on this for several years now. The Committee has pushed for it; the Assembly has voted for it; the general public and 7,000 responses are, apparently, 95% in favour of it. So I welcome it: end of story. That is not to say that I do not have some concerns about the other matters that members have raised, particularly about the children who are being offered places miles and miles away. I think I heard that we are now down to 24 cases where children have not yet been offered a placement in the area of their choice. I find that completely unbelievable, to be honest. It always comes back to this question of what is acceptable, what is not and what happens to the ones who drop off the radar. I have concerns about that. However, the actual regulatory change that you are here to talk about it is very much overdue and is to be welcomed. You can take that as a question, if you want.

Miss L Wilson: Thank you. Yes, just to confirm: at the end of stage 2 of the preschool process, there were 24 children unplaced, of those who had remained with the process.

Mr Lunn: They seemed to be put out as 24 children who had not been offered a place in the area of their choice. It just beggars belief that that is the case. I know that in the first round there is a big number and then, as parents do not take up places and so on, it decreases. However, if we are really down to 24 sets of parents who have not been satisfied — let us put it that way — I am totally amazed. It does not seem credible. I am sure that there will be more than 24 in Lisburn.

Miss L Wilson: Those are parents who nominated further preferences at stage 2 and stayed within the process. Additional places can then be brought on. That is the figure that we have been shown by the boards. There is still the number of children, which Mrs Dobson referred to, who did not go through the stage 2.

Mr Lunn: That means that 99.9999% have now been satisfied and have got places in the area of their choice.

Miss L Wilson: Or in a place that is acceptable to them

Mr Lunn: That is 24 out of 23,000.

Miss M McIlveen: That does not indicate that they are entirely satisfied.

Mr Lunn: I know that. That is why I am asking. You are introducing "entirely satisfied". "Entirely satisfied" is getting a place in Kilkeel when you live in Lisburn.

Miss L Wilson: It is progress, but we still have more work to do.

Mr Rogers: I welcome the change in the legislation as well. Just going on Trevor's point, and going back to Jo-Anne's point and the Chair's point, which I do not want to repeat, lots of people do not have a second choice, particularly in the rural situation. This is about putting children first. The child of a

one-parent family who has to work at maybe two jobs to keep the bread on the table, or the child of a husband and wife who are manual workers both out working to keep the bread on the table, the way the system is at the minute those children are still socially disadvantaged. I thought I heard you saying that this was the first step in a process. I welcome that because the definition of social disadvantage really has to be looked at. My question really is this: can you clarify the position of the child with special educational needs?

Mrs Julie Stephenson (Department of Education): The original regulations contained the option for governors to give priority to children with special educational needs. That option is continuing in the regulations as amended. Priority will initially be given to those from socially disadvantaged circumstances. The other children in their final preschool year will then take priority, but boards of governors will continue to have the option to give priority to special educational needs children if they so wish. That was welcomed by some stakeholders who provided comment through the informal engagement.

Mr Rogers: Is that with the current system that we have for statemented children, or where are they on the special needs register?

Mrs Marie Abbott (Department of Education): If a child has a statement, the board can nominate a school for them. They can say that there will be a place for your child in this setting because that setting is known to have expertise, particular space or a particular track record of working with children with special statemented needs. That is often made in addition to the number of children already in the class in the school.

Mrs Hale: I also welcome the removal of the July/August birthdays, being a parent of two daughters who were both young for their year. The younger eventually got a place two weeks from the end of term 35 miles away, but I was lucky that I was in a position that I was able to drive and do that. To pick up on the Chair's point again about the socially disadvantaged, we have parents in Lisburn — and I am sure all the Lagan Valley members have been contacted — who have been offered places in Newcastle, Bangor and Armagh.

Those are working parents, working-class parents, working really hard. Not being placed in a local nursery has a knock-on effect when it comes to applying for the local primary school because a lot of the criteria are that they must have attended the local nursery school. So, we are having children in these areas being completely displaced and having to go further and further out for their local primary school. Maybe, when those children are being rejected from their local nursery schools, we need to look at how we can ensure that that will not affect the rest of their school career and they will be displaced all the way through their academic years.

Miss L Wilson: The fact that some primary schools set attendance at a particular nursery school as a criterion for entry was picked up in the review of preschool admissions. Primary schools should not do that. We are looking at how we can stop that from happening because, as you point out, that is not the way we are running the preschool programme. That is an additional burden and concern for parents when we come to place children. I say again that I am disappointed to hear that places so far out are still being given as acceptable places. I will raise that with the education and library boards specifically.

Mrs Hale: It is an issue. Do parents pay for a private nursery, or do they pay for the diesel to take their children to and from nurseries? I would be pleased if the Department could offer any support on that. Thank you.

Mr McKay: A number of the questions that I wanted to ask have already been answered. Brenda made a good. It is something that needs to be looked at in terms of primary schools and their admissions being tied in to preschools. That is an anomaly that will have an effect in certain areas, and the Department should look at that.

This statutory rule is about the July/August birthday criterion, and it is welcome that it is before the Committee before the summer period and the next school year. The results of the survey that was carried out in June 2004 showed that 95% of respondents broadly agreed that the July/August birthday criterion should be discontinued. I suppose that the most up-to-date consultation was with the early years stakeholder group, which included Early Years, Gingerbread, the National Children's Bureau, nursery schools and so on. What was the input of those groups? What were their views on the statutory rule?

Mrs Stephenson: They were generally positive. Everyone at the meeting was supportive of it, and we asked for any further comments to be fed through to us. We received four further follow-up comments, all of which were supportive of the removal of the July and August criterion. Any comments were around how we communicate that message and support it by way of a circular to schools on how criteria should be set. We will take those comments on board.

The Chairperson: Linda, you and Sean referred to the definition of "socially disadvantaged". What is the time frame for that work?

Miss L Wilson: It is slightly longer, because we will not be able to do anything on that until the new welfare reform conditions are clear. If we maintain a social disadvantage criterion, it will have to link to welfare reform and the qualifying criteria that are introduced for that.

I suppose the second issue is around what a social disadvantage criterion should look like. Until now, it has been an economic criterion, which would translate to welfare reform. Issues have also been raised with us about children in care and where they sit in the social disadvantage framework. It might be that the Department has a bit of work to do, first, to define, in a very broad way, what it means by social disadvantage. I hear what you are saying about working parents, particularly those who are on low incomes. Ultimately, it is a matter for the Minister to decide how he wants to take that forward. However, from what is coming through to us it seems to me that there are a number of other strands that we need to think about in shaping whatever regulation we create going forward.

The other piece of legislation that I think that we need to look at as a matter of urgency is around two-year-olds, who, under the current legislation, are able to come in to the preschool programme. Last year, we brought the number of them down considerably. It is not appropriate educationally for two-year-olds to be in that programme, and it obviously causes problems with pressure on places, even though the two-stage process holds them back. I think that it would be much cleaner if we had legislation that meant that we did not bring them into the preschool programme. We need to look at when we might have an opportunity to do that.

The Chairperson: Will that consideration also be given to how you will make it easier for state provision to increase and make additional provision in areas where there is a clear demand? We have the ludicrous situation in which the only element of the sector that can expand is voluntary and community providers. That is because of a legislative barrier that means that you have to go through all these hoops to have a development proposal.

I also believe that there is a conflict of interest. Some of the people who sit on the Pre-school Education Advisory Groups (PEAGs), the statutory organisation that looks at provision, are private providers. I cannot see why that has never been addressed by the Department, because there is a clear conflict of interest. What steps will the Department take to ensure that it is easier? In this new modern age that we live in now, we try to deal with everybody equally, and equality seems to be the in thing. What equality is there in how statutory provision can expand in the same way and under the same set of circumstances as is the case in the voluntary and community sector? What work is being done on that? It seems as though, at the minute, we just throw money at the community and voluntary sector. It gets millions of pounds; Christmas comes early for it every year. We do not wait until December to give it money; we give it in September time.

Miss L Wilson: The Minister has approved a number of development proposals for statutory nurseries over the past number of months, but the real issue comes when we see where the demand is in a particular year. Your point is then: how does the statutory sector have an opportunity to reform and to react flexibly and quickly? The voluntary sector has been very valuable to the Department because it can bring on more places. So, we are looking at ways, on a one-year basis, to allow the statutory sector to vary its numbers. We are looking at a temporary variation for a small number, but, in the past few weeks, the Minister has made it clear to the boards that he will look at any proposals for solutions. We perhaps need to feed that in a little bit earlier in the process.

We are carrying out an exercise at the moment to see what mechanisms there might be to allow the statutory sector to respond on a one-year basis without a full development proposal being required, because that is a different process that takes a longer time and creates places permanently. However, one of our big problems with that is the two-year-olds. The statutory sector takes the two-year-olds because, under open enrolment legislation, it is entitled to do that. On one hand, we are creating additional places, and, on the other, more two-year-olds are taking those up. At the moment,

we are actively looking at what we can do to increase the statutory sector's capacity on a short-term basis.

Mr Craig: Linda, I was determined to say very little on this issue, but you have hit a trigger in my mind. You mentioned the word "demand", and that absolutely intrigues me. How does the Department measure demand? Is it just done retrospectively? Do you get a flood of applications and then know what the demand is, or is any work put in to, perhaps, predicting a demand increase or decrease in an area and, therefore, looking at what provision is available in that area?

I have to be fundamentally honest with you, Linda. As an MLA for Lagan Valley, I am frustrated beyond belief with this issue. I can forgive anybody for getting something wrong in a single year; things can happen that you could not have predicted. After a second year, you start to wonder if it is mismanagement. We got it for three years in a row in Lagan Valley — and very large numbers were involved. How come the Department could not predict the demand in that specific area? We are sending people as far away as Newcastle to their so-called area of choice. I can tell you now it is not their first area of choice. It is not even their fifth area of choice. In some people's cases, it is maybe the 15th or 16th choice, and they just go there because they cannot find any other provision and are fortunate enough that they can afford the transport to those areas. What actual work does the Department do in predicting demand, as opposed to just reacting to it?

Miss L Wilson: At a strategic level, we can predict the overall number of children likely to be needing places. One thing that has improved in recent years is that we have the overall amount of funding more right than before. As you will recall, a few years ago additional money always had to be found to provide for the number of places. So, we have made progress in addressing that.

The next layer down is places in a particular area. We are reliant on the education and library boards and the PEAGs for that sort of strategic planning information. That needs to be strengthened, particularly where there are demographic changes that we should be able to see.

The key thing is when the process starts to run and parents put their applications in. You can then see very clearly where the providers are with the most applications who are most oversubscribed. It is a case of being able to take steps earlier in the process to see whether something can be done. We need to be more flexible and fleet of foot earlier in the process. I will be engaging with the education and library boards on that shortly to see what steps we can take. We make places available at the end of the process. Is there something we can do to accelerate that?

Mr Craig: That brings us back to the point the Chairman was making around all this. If you leave it until the applications come in, the only people with the ability to react at that stage are in the private sector. When you look at the long list of things that the public sector must do to justify an increase or a new provision in its sector, there is a clear lack of equality between the two.

Miss L Wilson: That is where we need to be saying to the boards on a temporary basis, if there is a particular issue in the statutory sector that can be addressed by more places, we need them to do that because they would need the building and the capacity there. The second issue around planning is for the Minister to look at development proposals as they come in for areas where there is a consistent and projected demand and there is growth in the statutory sector. We are seeing more development proposals coming in, which the Minister is giving approval to if there is demand in that sector.

Mr Lunn: You mentioned two-year-olds, Linda. The Public Accounts Committee that I was on two or three years ago made a pretty strong recommendation about that. I think I heard you say that you have partly addressed that and you intend to address the rest of it as quickly as you can. It just seems so simple, really. Maybe politicians are simple. The last people to get a place in the statutory sector should be two-year-olds. In other words, only if everyone is satisfied and there are still a few places left that some parents can use — the statutory sector is being used as a crèche. That is what they are doing. Why is it taking so long? It must be three years since that report came out.

Miss L Wilson: We tried doing it through policy and administration, which has helped up to a point. However, the Department needs to find a legislative vehicle to bring the legislation through. We will now be actively looking at that because we tried the policy and administrative route and it worked only up to a point.

Mr Lunn: The particular thing that we are here to talk about today, July/August — you produced a regulation to change the situation very quickly once the decision was made. Why does it take so long to make what would appear to be a fairly simple regulatory change?

Miss L Wilson: This is secondary legislation. The other thing is primary. I think this one is a statutory rule, which can be signed by an official as opposed to primary legislation in a Bill or Act.

Mr Lunn: I really cannot imagine why the principal of a statutory nursery would want to take the abuse that comes when parents know that they have taken two-year-olds and there are four-year-olds out there who feel they are entitled to a place, and cannot get them in their locality.

Miss L Wilson: That is an interesting point. Looking at the pattern of two-year-olds is interesting because a number of nursery schools will have a single two-year-old who has, perhaps, dropped in. However, there will also be nursery schools with, perhaps, 12 or 15 two-year-olds. That highlights the fact that the demand in that area for statutory provision is not as high as it may once have been. The other side of the Department making more provision available is perhaps to look at less provision being available in certain areas where traditionally there has been a high number of nursery schools, but those nursery schools are not filling up with children of the correct age.

Mr Lunn: In an ideal world, the 24 that we are down to now would all be two-year-olds. I know it is not easy; I am not saying it is easy. It is a big area and plan and it is not totally co-ordinated, but we have to do something about that.

Miss M McIlveen: Thank you very much. I was not going to comment, but because we have deviated from July/August, I feel that I can.

I met a group of preschool providers this morning whose feelings are that there is not a lot of consistency in relation to the allocation of numbers. Of two various groups, one may have a very popular nursery in one year and then have its numbers reduced for the following year, and another group might have 16 children looking to be allocated there, yet it is allocated 26. There is an inconsistency of the numbers and, once there is a reallocation, you find that one particular group is stealing potential pupils from other groups, which creates an imbalance. There is a general lack of consistency, but I suppose the call that they were making, given the fact that this is a minefield even for the Education Committee, is for an idiot's guide, for want of a better term, for nursery provision.

The Chairperson: It is called early years, but we have not got it yet.

Miss M McIlveen: Something that could make it much easier for parents who have children coming of age so that they can understand what their choices are, and to explain to them what the options and availability in their area are, would be helpful.

Miss L Wilson: At the moment, I think we have probably too much information for parents, the result being they cannot read the key messages. It is another matter that I want to talk to the boards about, to see whether there is some way we could have even a flyer; one page that says "here are the key things". They run the process, and that is something that I will certainly raise with them.

Miss M McIlveen: Apologies for referring to it as an idiot's guide.

The Chairperson: Linda; thank you. Julie, we will have to exercise our minds over that issue in the next few weeks. The statutory rule will probably be laid. If you have any more information in relation to how the Department is framing its views around the open enrolment criteria, two-year-olds and the definition of "socially disadvantaged", I think it would be useful to try and give us some steer as to where we think that the Department is going with that.

Miss L Wilson: We certainly will once we have got that shaped up a bit.

In conclusion, this process is a very complex one. It has grown up higgledy-piggledy over the years. We are really trying to get to grips with the key issues and make changes so that it is better for parents moving forward. As we do that work, we are willing to look at all kinds of ideas about what might be done to improve the process. We are very receptive to any thoughts that anyone might have about things that we could look at.

The Chairperson: Can you provide a list of the PEAGs, and everyone who is on the PEAGs, across the country? I think it would be useful if members could see that.

Miss L Wilson: Yes, certainly.

Mr Lunn: Can the Department provide a figure for the number of two-year-olds who are being accommodated in the statutory sector this year?

Miss L Wilson: Yes, we can certainly give you the up-to-date figure. The figure, from memory, is around 500. That is considerably down on where it was before we introduced the two-year-olds — the two-stage process — when it was about 1,200. However, this time last year, it was around 300, but when we did the schools census in October, it was up to 500. We can certainly give you the figure of where we are now. It would be very interesting to compare that with the school census in October, because I suspect it will be higher, unfortunately.

The Chairperson: Linda, thank you very much.