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# Programme for Government pre-school commitment

## Summary

The Draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2011-15 included a commitment to ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it. This paper sets out the current arrangements for pre-school provision, and considers the commitment in comparison to the current approach; the implementation of the commitment; and potential issues.

### **Current approach and PfG commitment**

Currently, pre-school places are available across a range of providers. Where a provider is oversubscribed, they are required to use admissions criteria giving priority to children with July/ August birthdays or children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The majority of individual statutory settings are over-subscribed and it is not always possible to provide a pre-school place in line with a parent's first preference.

The Minister for Education has stated that the commitment within the PfG reiterates that of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP). However, the Department's draft *Early Years (0-6) Strategy* states that the PSEEP aim of '*providing a pre-school place for every child whose parents wish it*' has already been achieved. If this is the case, the PfG commitment does not provide anything additional to the

current situation. While the evidence indicates that most target-age children who applied in 2011/12 were offered a place, not all parents obtained a place in their first preference pre-school setting. As currently stated, the PfG commitment does not indicate plans to address this issue.

### **Implementation**

There is currently a lack of detail regarding how the PfG commitment will be implemented. The Department and the Minister have stated that this will be informed by responses to the consultation, and by the recently published *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements*. This review highlights a number of actions that, if implemented, would likely have implications for the implementation of the PfG commitment.

For example, examining the definition of social disadvantage with a view to mirroring the economic elements of Free School Meal Entitlement would increase the number of children with priority for pre-school places, as would plans to introduce a Pre-School Admissions Code outlining which groups of children should have preference.

### **Potential issues**

Evidence from stakeholders and other research highlights a number of concerns around the implementation of the commitment. These include how the commitment will be funded, the extent to which supply will be matched with demand, and concerns around the quality of provision.

### **Conclusion**

The current lack of detail around the PfG commitment raises challenges for consideration of this issue. However, the findings in this paper suggest a number of areas that could be given further consideration. These include:

- To what extent the commitment provides anything additional to the aim of the PSEEP, particularly in light of the statement in the Early Years Strategy that the aim of the PSEEP has already been achieved;
- Whether implementation of the commitment will seek to increase the number of parents who obtain a place for their child in their first preference setting;
- The implications of the actions set out in the *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements*, particularly in regard to expanding the definition of disadvantage and increasing the number of groups of children who may be given priority in admissions;
- How the commitment will be funded until 2014/15, including taking account of the current funding differentials between sectors;
- What measures will be taken to ensure high levels of quality in implementing the commitment? For example, will measures seek to address the reported high

turnover of staff, lower minimum levels of staff qualifications and lack of opportunities for professional development in some sectors?

- How the Department will monitor whether the commitment is being achieved, for example, will it measure the extent to which parents obtain a place in a local setting?

## 1 Introduction

A Draft Programme for Government (PfG) was introduced to the Assembly on November 17<sup>th</sup> 2011, setting out the Executive's plans and priorities for the period 2011-15. One of the commitments, under the second priority of '*creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and well-being*' was to provide one year of pre-school education to all children, as illustrated in the following table.

**Table 1: Milestones and outputs for the PfG commitment on pre-school education**

Commitment	Milestones/ outputs		
	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15
<b>Ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it</b>	Develop proposals for a change programme to deliver the pre-school education	Arrangements in place to deliver pre-school education on demand	-

## 2 Current arrangements for pre-school provision

The Department of Education (the Department) states that it encourages all parents with a child entering their immediate pre-school year to apply for a funded pre-school place; however, it notes that a place is not guaranteed. It outlines three main types of provision available:<sup>1</sup>

- Statutory nursery schools;
- Nursery units in primary schools; and
- Voluntary and private sector settings.

In the case of a pre-school provider being oversubscribed, it is currently required to use specified admissions criteria and to give priority to children from disadvantaged

<sup>1</sup> Department of Education: *Applying for a Funded Pre-School Place - 2012/13* [online] Available at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/pre-school-education-pg/16-pre-school-education-whatparentsneedtoknow-pg.htm>

backgrounds and to children with 4th birthdays from 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2012 to 31<sup>st</sup> August 2012 inclusive (in the pre-school year 2012/13).<sup>2</sup>

The Minister for Education, John O'Dowd MLA, has acknowledged that it is not always possible to provide a pre-school place in line with a parent's first preference.<sup>3</sup> In addition, a recent report from the Department states that the majority of individual statutory settings are over-subscribed. The report notes that where children fail to obtain a place in a preferred setting, there is a risk that parent will be unable or unwilling to place their child with an alternative provider.<sup>4</sup>

### **Pre-School Education Expansion Programme**

In 1998 the Department launched its Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP), aiming to provide a pre-school place for every child in its immediate pre-school year whose parents wished to avail of it.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office published a report on the programme in 2009. It found that the Programme had supported a 'substantial increase' in the number of available pre-school places. However, it highlighted that there were still areas with a shortfall or excess of provision, noting that the Department had stated that supply cannot be matched to demand with geographical exactness due to the non-compulsory nature of pre-school education and the constantly changing demography.<sup>5</sup>

The Department states that further pre-school provision has been provided on a phased basis since the beginning of the programme, with additional places created through the building of new nursery schools and units in the statutory nursery sector and the funding of places in the voluntary and private sectors. It indicates that the availability of places for children in their final pre-school year has increased from 45% in 1997 to over 90% in the 2011/12 school year.<sup>6</sup>

## **3 PfG commitment in comparison to the current approach**

The commitment in the PfG to ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it is consistent with stated aim of the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP), and the current Minister for Education has stated that it is a reiteration of the commitment made by the PSEEP.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Department of Education: *Applying for a Funded Pre-School Place - 2012/13* [online] Available at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/pre-school-education-pg/16-pre-school-education-whatparentsneedtoknow-pg.htm>

<sup>3</sup> *Minister for Education Response to an Assembly Question by Mr Sydney Anderson MLA*, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2012

<sup>4</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements* Bangor: DE

<sup>5</sup> Comptroller and Auditor General (2009) *The Pre-School Education Expansion Programme* Belfast: The Stationery Office

<sup>6</sup> Department of Education: *Pre-school places* [online] Available at: <http://www.deni.gov.uk/index/pre-school-education-pg/16-pre-school-education-preschoolplaces-pg.htm>

<sup>7</sup> *Minister for Education Response to an Assembly Question by Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson MLA*, 17<sup>th</sup> December 2011

However, the Department's draft *Early Years (0-6) Strategy* indicates that the PSEEP commitment has already been achieved. If this is the case, the PfG commitment does not provide anything additional to the current situation. The Strategy states that:<sup>8</sup>

*"The PSEEP has successfully achieved its aim of providing a pre-school place for every child whose parents wish it."*

While the evidence indicates that most (97%) target-age children who applied in 2011/12 were offered a place, the evidence indicates that not all parents obtained a place in their first preference pre-school setting. As currently stated, the PfG commitment does not indicate plans to address this issue.

In 2011/12, 1,488 parents were advised at the end of Stage One of the admissions process that they had failed to secure a place in their preferred setting. Of these, over half stated further preferences, and more than 80% of these parents subsequently obtained a place.<sup>9</sup>

## 4 Implementing the commitment

Overall, the PfG lacks detail on how this commitment will be implemented; simply stating that there will be the development of proposals for a 'change programme' to deliver it. The Department has stated that the commitment will be refined in light of the consultation responses received on the PfG.<sup>10</sup>

In an answer to an Assembly Question on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2012, the Minister for Education stated that the recently published *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements* and the establishment of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) would help to inform what changes are required. He highlighted the following as among the potential options for creating additional places:<sup>11</sup>

- The creation of new or additional statutory nursery units; or
- The allocation of funded places in the voluntary and private settings participating in the PSEEP.

### **Potential implications of the *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements***

The Department of Education has stated that the PfG commitment will need to be considered in light of the recently published *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements*.<sup>12</sup>

This Review highlights a number of actions for the Department, however the Minister for Education has stated that the report should "*be regarded as a framework for action*

<sup>8</sup> Department of Education (2010) *Early Years (0-6) Strategy* Bangor: DE

<sup>9</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements* Bangor: DE

<sup>10</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education in response to a request, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2012

<sup>11</sup> *Minister for Education Response to an Assembly Question by Mr Sydney Anderson MLA*, 17<sup>th</sup> January 2012

<sup>12</sup> Information provided by the Department of Education in response to a request, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2012

*rather than a list of agreed actions to be implemented immediately.*” The Minister stated that for some of the actions, further investigation, costings and consultation or legislation may be required.

The following table highlights examples of the actions around policy that, if pursued, may have particular implications for the PfG commitment.

**Table 2: Examples of policy actions from the Review of Pre-School Admissions Arrangements that may have an impact on the PfG commitment**

Action for the Department	Explanation
Revoke the July/ August birthdays criterion in the 1999 Regulations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>States that there is no justification for the continued use of this criterion;</li> <li>There is no educational reason why older children should have access to pre-school education</li> </ul>
Ensure that the definition of children from ‘socially disadvantaged circumstances’ within the 1999 Regulations is examined with a view to mirroring the relevant economic elements of the definition of Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The objectives underpinning Departmental policy are to raise educational standards for all; the review states that this includes providing targeted support to the most disadvantaged</li> <li>States that any definition of disadvantage should be consistent with those used elsewhere in the education system: FSME is the main proxy measure used</li> </ul>
Develop and issue a Pre-School Admissions Code providing specific guidance in relation to the content of admissions criteria, including expectations on the preference to be given to some groups of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Review states that there are particular groups of children who should be given greater consideration in allocation of places (possibly to include Newcomer children, children of Travellers, children with Special Education Needs)</li> <li>However it states that statutory provision is not the most appropriate vehicle for this</li> </ul>
Examine, as part of the Early Years Strategy, the implications of standardising the duration of pre-school provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Currently there is a varied pattern of full- and part-time provision (historically, provision in the statutory sector included both part-time and full-time enrolments, while voluntary and private settings are funded under PSEEP to offer only part-time provision)</li> </ul>

The actions outlined in this report, if implemented, are likely to have implications for the PfG commitment to ensure that at least one year of pre-school education is available to every family that wants it.

For example, the potential to revise the criterion around children from disadvantaged backgrounds to include children with Free School Meal Entitlement is likely to lead to an increase in the number of children with priority for pre-school places.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the plans to introduce a Pre-School Admissions Code outlining the preference to be given to certain groups of children is likely to further augment the number of children given priority.

The review also highlights a number of actions around meeting local demand. These include:

- The Department will expect ELBs/ Pre-school Education Advisory Groups (PEAGs) to produce a standard suite of relevant statistical data to inform area planning;
- Each ELB/ PEAG will be required to develop detailed contingency plans to meet shortfalls in provision in particular areas;
- The Department will expect the five ELBs/ PEAGs to develop a protocol to encourage and support the creation of additional voluntary/ private sector provision where it is required;
- In progressing area-based planning, the Department/ ESA should undertake a strategic review of the number and location of pre-school places to inform future planning.

## 5 Potential issues around the commitment

Evidence from stakeholders and other research highlights a number of potential issues around the PfG commitment. Examples of these are discussed briefly in the following paragraphs.

### **Funding implications**

In the current climate of significant financial constraint, concerns have been raised around how the PfG commitment to provide pre-school education to every child whose parents wish it will be funded. There are differences in the costs of funding provision depending on the type of provision available. The following table provides an overview of funding for the year 2010-11.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements* Bangor: DE

<sup>14</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements* Bangor: DE

**Table 3: Funding per pupil for pre-school provision 2010-11**

Type of provision	Funding per pupil
Voluntary/ Private (part-time only)	£1,725
Nursery units (part-time)	£1,841
Nursery schools (part-time)	£1,964
Nursery units (full-time)	£2,776
Nursery schools (full-time)	£2,986

### Matching supply to demand

As previously discussed, many parents do not obtain a place for their child in their first preference setting. In particular, concerns have been raised about children being allocated a place far from their home.

The Department states that ensuring that there is adequate provision to meet demand within an area is 'difficult', highlighting challenges around predicting demand due to population shifts and the largely inflexible statutory sector. It also notes that there is variance across the region in the use of statistical planning on an area basis.<sup>15</sup>

The Department characterises the current system of provision as *operating 'around a largely static core of statutory provision, with the voluntary/ private sector providing the flexibility to respond to additional demand.'*<sup>16</sup> In particular, voluntary provision does not commit the Department to capital expenditure and the long-term commitment to maintain the property.

### Quality of provision

A number of stakeholders have raised concerns regarding the quality of early years education and care that will be delivered through this commitment.

The commitment on pre-school provision is stated under Priority Two of the PfG, which relates to *'Creating opportunities, tackling disadvantage and improving health and well-being.'* A key longitudinal research project (which was replicated in Northern Ireland) found that the quality of pre-school provision is directly related to the intellectual and social development of children. It stated that quality pre-school provision can play an

<sup>15</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements* Bangor: DE

<sup>16</sup> Department of Education (2012) *Review of the Pre-School Admissions Arrangements* Bangor: DE

important role in combating social exclusion and in improving outcomes for disadvantaged children.<sup>17</sup>

However, evidence from the Chief Inspector's Report 2008-2010 and from a study into effective pre-school provision highlighted concerns around variations in quality between different sectors of pre-school provision. These reports noted that while good quality can be found across all types of early years settings, quality was higher overall in statutory nursery schools and classes.<sup>18</sup>

The Chief Inspector's Report noted while there has been improvement in the number of statutory nursery units, voluntary and private settings rated 'good' or 'outstanding in the review period; a number of factors may be inhibiting continuous and systematic improvement in these sectors in particular, namely:

- High turn-over of staff;
- Lack of consistent and effective support from an early years specialist;
- Lower minimum level of staff qualifications; and
- A lack of opportunities for professional development.

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<sup>17</sup> Sylva, K. et al. (2010) *Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project* London and New York: Routledge

<sup>18</sup> As above and Education and Training Inspectorate (2010) *The Chief Inspector's Report 2008-2010* ETI