

## **CASE STUDY – THE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION EXPANSION PROGRAMME**

### **Background**

The expansion of funded pre-school education in Great Britain in the mid-1990s arose from the Government's commitment, as part of a National Childcare Strategy, to providing a good quality pre-school education place for every four year old whose parents wished to avail of it. The Northern Ireland policy document 'Investing Early Learning' detailed the Pre-School Education Expansion Programme, the initiative by which the expansion of funded pre-school education would be achieved in Northern Ireland, and set the Programme in the context of the wider Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy, 'Children First', which was being developed at that time.

Research in the UK and US shows that good quality pre-school education has important benefits for individuals, families, communities and society and the economy as a whole. Children who experience good pre-school education, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with special needs, are better prepared for school, learn more quickly and have fewer emotional or behavioural difficulties in later life. In addition, parents have greater opportunity to work, undertake study or training, or care for other dependants.

### **Approach**

'Children First' envisaged an integrated approach to early childhood education and care. This approach operated at a number of levels in the implementation of the Expansion Programme.

The Inter-Departmental Group on Early Years (IDGEY), originally set up in 1995 and consisting of the Department of Education (DE), Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Department for Employment and Learning (DEL), has acted as the oversight body for the implementation of 'Children First' as a whole. Through IDGEY, Expansion Programme requirements such as qualifications for voluntary/private sector centre staff and Early Years Specialists have been agreed, common service standards for voluntary/private centres have been established and a sub-group to examine the integration of regulation and inspection of care has been set up.

The raising of standards and the maintenance of quality are fundamental elements of the Programme. The Education and Training Inspectorate's (ETI) inspection remit was therefore extended to include voluntary and private sector providers (otherwise in the Health Trusts' bailiwick) in receipt of PEAG-funded places.

A Pre-school Education Advisory Group (PEAG) was established in each Education and Library Board area. Its role was to prepare, for the Department's approval, an annual Development Plan identifying the need for additional pre-school provision across its area and for meeting it through the provision of places in both the statutory nursery and voluntary/private sectors. The PEAGs are inter-agency groups which contain representatives of all relevant local interests – Education and Library Boards, Health Boards and Trusts, Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, the voluntary/private sector, integrated and Irish-medium education. The PEAGs have mutual membership with the Area Childcare Partnerships, themselves inter-agency bodies which assist the preparation of annual childcare plans and inform the continuous development of

childcare policy and strategy.

The Department prepares annual databases to aid the PEAGs' planning. These include details of funded pre-school providers, Primary 1 enrolments (used as a proxy for pre-school numbers) and social need levels, down to electoral ward area. Maps colour-coded to show provision levels at ward level are also provided.

There was extensive consultation on:

- the role and makeup of the PEAGs; and
- the contents of 'Investing in Early Learning', which gave details of:
  - the aims and implementation of the Expansion Programme,
  - its impact on existing provision and providers (in particular, it announced the government's intention to reduce reception provision, which was and is of uneven quality), and
  - the requirements relating to staff qualifications, groups sizes, etc necessary to attain and maintain quality.

Having secured from the centre a small initial funding baseline to begin pre-school expansion, in the 1998 Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) the Department submitted bids to the centre for recurrent and capital provision to give fuller effect to the Government's manifesto commitment. The bids gave due regard to Northern Ireland's different educational arrangements from GB – our lower compulsory school age and single entry date of September each year. The CSR outcome provided recurrent funding for an additional 7,000 pre-school places over three years (together with associated capital), to bring coverage up from 45% to 85% of the pre-school cohort by 2001/02.

Since the expansion would be incremental, priority in admission was given to children of socially disadvantaged parents. Research indicates that such children benefit more than others from pre-school education. Priority was also given to older children (those with July and August birthdays).

The original target of 85% coverage of children in their immediate pre-school year was subsequently expanded in the Programme for Government to a year's funded pre-school education for every child whose parents wish it, the long-term aim set out in 'Investing in Early Learning'. To determine the possible extent of demand, the Department included questions in the Universal Household Survey undertaken by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). From the data received it was estimated that no more than 90% of parents would seek a funded place for their child in its immediate pre-school year and evidence of take-up has proved this to be largely correct.

At the beginning of the Programme, DE and DHSSPS jointly commissioned the Effective Pre-School Provision in Northern Ireland (EPPNI) research project. Like its counterpart in England, EPPNI investigates three issues that have important implications for policy and practice:

- the effects on children of different types of pre-school provision;
- the structural (e.g. length of sessions) and "process" characteristics (e.g. interaction styles) of more effective pre-school centres; and

- the interaction between child and family characteristics and the kind of pre-school provision a child experiences.

## **Outcomes**

In 2002/03, the final year of the expansion phase of the Programme, funded pre-school places were available for 92% of children in their immediate pre-school year. This is consistent with the expected take-up rate evidenced by the Household Survey.

The Programme provided both integrated and Irish-medium pre-school education providers with the opportunity to access mainstream Government funding for the first time and, provided they were included in the Pre-School Education Development Plans, the opportunity to establish statutory nursery provision.

With the allocation of funded places to almost 400 playgroups and the building of over 100 new statutory settings, better coverage of pre-school provision across Northern Ireland was provided, particularly in rural areas.

The number of pre-school children being educated in reception setting has been reduced from 2,600 to 1,200 over the period of the Programme.

Evidence from ETI shows that the majority (70%) of voluntary/private settings are providing pre-school education of an overall satisfactory, good or very good quality.

There is evidence of improved cross-agency working.

## **Lessons Learned**

Given its capacity to promote improvement, inspection was built in from the earliest stages.

Consultation with those involved in implementing changes is important. Currently ELBs and PEAGs are holding seminars to explain to voluntary and statutory providers a change in the admissions arrangements.

It was not anticipated that the number of parents who would chose voluntary/private over statutory provision would be as high as it has been. This has resulted in surplus places in some nursery schools and units being filled by children not yet in their immediate pre-school year. As a result there are at present some 1,800 underage children (13% of children in the statutory sector) being educated by the Programme.

An integrated budget for the voluntary and statutory sectors rather than separate budgets would have provided a more flexible financial structure.

Greater emphasis might have been given to the development of the voluntary rather than the statutory sector as it is more responsive to demand changes and at present does not commit the Department to capital expenditure and the long-term commitment to the maintenance of a fixed capital asset. As against this, there is evidence that the statutory sector provides slightly higher quality education and better long-term outcomes than the voluntary/private sector.

At the outset there was insufficient appreciation of the potential for delays to the capital programme. As a result, it could not be completed within the envisaged time-frame.

A common approach to identifying need should have been introduced across all Education and Library Boards; and greater cognisance should have been taken of the effects of travel to work areas, particularly in the Belfast hinterland of North Down and South Antrim.

Greater emphasis should have been given at the beginning of the Programme to the Department's policy that all places were open to all children and this would have reduced the wrangling to protect or promote sectoral provision.

A more easily quantifiable target than the Programme for Government target should have been set as such an abstract target makes it difficult to determine whether or not it has been achieved.