

## Pre-school Provision

There are two main forms of provision for children in their pre-school year:

1. Nursery Schools

This is primarily statutory provision located or linked to a local primary school. Provision normally runs from 9:00 till 2:00 pm.

2. Pre-school Playgroups

This is mainly run by the community sector. Provision normally runs from 9:30 – 12:30.

Aim of provision:

To provide a safe, friendly environment for children in their pre-school year to enjoy and learn through play.

To develop and meet their SPICE needs (Social, Physical, Intellectual, Creative and Emotional).

To prepare them for entry into primary school the following year.

Target age group:

Children who will be entering primary school the following year. This will involve children who will turn three years of age between 1<sup>st</sup> July and 30<sup>th</sup> June before the start of the pre-school playgroup or nursery school year in September.

Funding:

1. Nursery Schools

Education budget, Pre-school Education Expansion Programme \*.

2. Pre-school Playgroups

Pre-school Education Expansion Programme \*, Fees, Fund-raising

\* Pre-school Education Expansion Programme

Funding provided through the Department of Education NI (DENI) for pre-school places within NI. Belfast was allocated 973 places (annually).

A case study produced by the OFMDFM on the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme has shown that funded places have been made available for 92% of children in their pre-school year. This is consistent with the expected take-up rate evidenced by the Household Survey.'

## Current situation

Due to demographic changes and the increase of funded places through the Pre-school Education Expansion Programme\*, there is currently a surplus of places within the pre-school sector. This has resulted in places being offered to younger children who are not in their pre-school year.

Currently within the 3 playgroups provided by Belfast City Council in the Playcentres, 19 (40%) of the places are taken by children who are of the target age and are currently in their pre-school year.

The remaining places have been offered to children who are outside the target age group; are younger than the target group and will be able to avail of two years of pre-school services. This has resulted in two age groups with the pre-school services who have different developmental needs and has impacted on the benefits of those children who are the target age group. Examples include:

1. Younger children cannot start until they have turned 3 years old and this has resulted in children starting at different times throughout the year. This is further exacerbated by children being withdrawn at different stages when a nursery place becomes available. This results in an unsettling time within the playgroup.
2. There are increased behavioural issues among the younger children due to their different developmental stage and needs.
3. There has been increasing demands for support with toileting issues for younger children.

To enable staff to meet the needs of children in both the pre-school year and the younger children, increased resources are required to ensure that children attending the pre-school playgroup services provided by Belfast City Council through the Playcentres. This would involve the permanent allocation of a third member of staff within each of the playgroups.