

NURSERY PROVISION - BELFAST CITY COUNCIL PLAY CENTRES - 12 FEBRUARY 2009

INTRODUCTION

The paper has been prepared by Herbie McLearnon, a Geographic Information Science consultant trading under the name 'theDATaman'.

REMIT

To establish the demand for Nursery Provision for children in their Pre-Primary Year and examine the extent of existing provision available to satisfy such demand.

BACKGROUND

Following several discussions with Council Officers during the last quarter of 2008, various methodologies were explored to seek to show the geographic relativity of the Council's nursery provision to both children in the pre-primary year and statutory Education and Library Board facilities already in existence. I was also asked to establish the extent to which the places at the Board's provision were filled with the target age group.

DATA & METHODOLOGY (1)

Having an obvious common interest, the Belfast Education and Library Board joined with the City Council in order to try to obtain data from the Eastern Health and Social Services Board which would enable the accurate representation of the residence of the children under its care, thereby giving accurate definition of potential demand. However over a period of months and after careful and sympathetic consideration of our request, the Health Board was unwilling to accede to our request.

DATA & METHODOLOGY (2)

A further round table met in December to re-appraise the situation and following discussion with the Education Board, I felt able to put forward a compromise proposal which took account of the extent of capacity within existing Board provision with particular reference to the respective numbers of applicants and attendees in both the Pre-Primary and Penultimate year groups. Using this knowledge together with the previously established understanding, setting aside 'special' circumstances, that 80% of users came from within a 750 metre radius of the provision, it was agreed that I would revisit the Education Board and accurately plot all of their Nurseries and School associated Nursery Units, construct the radii and overlay the current BCC provision.

With full acknowledgement of the help and data provided by the Education and Library Board (Gerry McGuinness) the project proceeded exactly as described above and it was immediately evident that all of the BCC provision lay within 750 metres of one or more BELB facilities established to meet the statutory requirement to provide nursery accommodation for all children in their pre-primary year.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS (GENERAL)

It also became clear that in many instances, the BELB were not in receipt of sufficient applicants in their pre-primary year and 'filled out' their places with applicants from the penultimate year. Further, having met this non-statutory demand, there remained 7 Board Nursery Units who did not receive sufficient applicants (of any age) to use all of the available capacity.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS (SPECIFIC)

All 3 of the BCC nurseries fell within 750 metres of BELB statutory provision with Avoniel within the catchment of 5 BELB Nurseries, Ballysillan Benview 3 + 1 Peag funded Playgroup and Olympia within range of 1. All but one of the BELB facilities had capacity cascaded down to children in their penultimate year and 2 of the 9 Nurseries unable to fill out their existing capacity. The detailed analysis is collated and summarised in the table below:

BCC Centre	Total Places	Local Qualifying*	BELB Spare	PEAG Provision
Benview Ballysillan	16	7	2	9
Olympia	16	7	2	0
Avoniel	16	6	40	0

*Number of children in BCC playgroup that are in the qualifying year.

OBSERVATIONS - GENERAL

The birth rate within the BCC area continues to decline albeit at a slower rate than previously the case and this is confirmed by the unprecedented experience of the BELB having unfilled capacity. Considering the present state of the housing market and although house prices have fallen, entry levels remain beyond the reach of many young couples who are opting to take accommodation outside the city. This would suggest that quite apart from any demographic trend, there will be fewer couples, with the potential to have children, actually residing within range of the existing Belfast nursery provision. There is therefore little to suggest any reasons for reversal of the total decline in child numbers.

OBSERVATIONS - AVONIEL

The situation is clear, unambiguous and not complicated by 'other factors' and in the face of ample statutory provision locally available from the BELB, Avoniel will always struggle to fill out its complement from local unsatisfied demand of children in their pre-primary year.

OBSERVATIONS - Benview Ballysillan

The combination of BELB spare capacity and PEAG funded provision appears to make adequate alternative provision for the children in this years BCC complement who live locally and are in their pre-primary year.

OBSERVATIONS - OLYMPIA

Although within the 750 metre radius, the BELB had only 2 qualifying places available, such is the predominance of non-housing development adjacent to the centre, it is considered possible that in line with the evidence of the BOOST membership, Nursery users may come in their own transport from well outside the local community and this being the case, there is more than sufficient BELB capacity within vehicular proximity.