

ANGUS COUNCIL

EDUCATION COMMITTEE

15 October 1996

REPORT BY THE DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Report No. 809/96

EXTENSION OF PRE-SCHOOL PROVISION**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this Report is to seek Committee approval in principle for a planned extension of pre-school provision with effect from August 1997

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Education Committee:

- a) instructs me to write to the Secretary of State for Scotland stressing again the Committee's view of the desirability of extending pre-school education by means other than the voucher system, but urging also that, if the government is determined to press ahead with its voucher scheme across Scotland with effect from August 1997, then further clarification of the details of this scheme are required as a matter of some urgency;
- b) instructs me to plan for the extension of pre-school provision in Angus on the assumption that the government's voucher scheme will be introduced in 1997, and with a target of the Council providing places for at least 90% of children in their pre-school year;
- c) approves in principle (subject to detailed consideration of funding arrangements) the additional pre-school places proposed in Appendix 1, these to be available with effect from August 1997;
- d) approves the arrangements for prioritising nursery enrolments detailed in Appendix 2;
- e) instructs me to bring forward further reports detailing the implications of making available the additional pre-school places outlined in Appendix 1.
- f) approves the secondment of a member of staff to assist with the planning of this initiative, initially for the period January - March 1997, on the understanding that the cost of this secondment will be contained within the Education Department's Nursery Sector Revenue Budget for 1996/97.

BACKGROUND

At its meeting on 13 March 1996, the Education Committee considered a report on pre-school provision and, inter alia,

- instructed me to bring forward proposals for the extension of pre-school provision in future years

(Article 4 refers)

The provisions of the Education (Scotland) Act 1996 came into force on 18 September 1996. Part II of this Act makes provision relating to the education of children under school age in the context of the government's scheme for Pre-School Education Vouchers, and national implementation of this scheme is to be effected in August 1997. Detailed guidance on the scheme is still awaited.

As reported to the Committee on 13 March 1996, the Council currently manages 1 nursery school, and 18 nursery classes attached to primary schools, offering a total of some 1100 places of five half-days per week principally for 4 year olds but with a small number of places available for 3 year olds. The voucher scheme, however, seems certain to be available only to children in their pre-school year and attention requires to be given initially to children in that age range. The average P1 intake into Angus schools over the last 7 years has been approximately 1400 pupils, and the best available estimates suggest that a pre-school year group of approximately 1400 children will continue, at least in the immediate future. The very limited information currently available from the four pilot schemes established by the Scottish Office in August 1996 suggests that, on average, 95% of parents with children eligible to take advantage of pre-school vouchers have done so. In these circumstances a reasonable starting point for future planning is that roughly 1400 pre-school places should be available in schools managed by the Council, and that these places should be distributed geographically across the Council in order to match as closely as possible the expected number of pre-school children in each area.

THE VOUCHER SCHEME

The scheme will be available only for children in their pre-school year. Thus for a child whose date of birth falls between 1 March and early August, a voucher will be available for use beginning in August immediately after that child's 4th birthday. At present the parent of any child whose birthday falls after the first school day of a new session in August, but on or before the last day of the following February, has a choice of sending the child to primary school in the August preceding her/his 5th birthday, or of delaying the child's entry into primary school until the following August. In practice few parents whose children's birthdays fall in the period August - December take advantage of this opportunity to delay entry into primary school, but active encouragement has been given, particularly to parents of any child whose birthday is in January/February, to consider very carefully whether or not

starting primary school at 4¹/₂ years really is in their child's best interests. In future, any parents in this position will, to all intents and purposes, require to give this matter serious consideration at least 6 months before their child's 4th birthday in order to decide whether or not to apply for a pre-school voucher for the year between 3¹/₂ years and 4¹/₂ years, or for the year between 4¹/₂ years and 5¹/₂ years, since a voucher will only be issued for one year in respect of any eligible child. This complication also makes planning more difficult for the Council in terms of accurately predicting the likely number of voucher-holding families in any one year.

The voucher is valued at £1100 and can be used to pay for five half-day sessions in a nursery school or class for the period of the normal school year. A parent can use the voucher in exchange for a place in a nursery managed by an education authority, or by a voluntary or private provider. However, all providers will be required to meet certain quality standards specified by the Scottish Office prior to being eligible to participate in the scheme. It would be prudent to assume that there will be some private providers in Angus who do become eligible to participate, but nonetheless to plan in such a way as to allow the Council to ensure it is taking all possible steps to provide high quality pre-school education under its own control for as many children as possible.

Once the voucher scheme is fully operational (in August 1997, according to the government's current plans), no block grant support whatsoever is likely to be made available to the Council to support its pre-school provision other than pre-school Special Educational Needs, and the Council's income from vouchers used in Council nurseries will therefore require to be off-set against any expenditure incurred in operating these nurseries.

CONTINGENCY PLANS

Given that all the major political parties currently in opposition to the government have declared themselves against the pre-school voucher scheme, and that there will be a General Election before August 1997, the Council will clearly wish to ensure that, by planning to extend pre-school provision, it is acting with due prudence. However, it is important to stress that the proposals contained in this paper are in direct response to a new piece of legislation, and that - given the existence of some pre-school provision already managed by the Council - it is utterly impossible for the Council to ignore this legislation: action of some sort is unavoidable. Furthermore, it seems reasonable to assume that, were any of the current opposition parties to become the party of government before August 1997, either the legislation would remain unaltered, or alternative financial support would be provided to enable the Council's plans to be effected without any undue anxiety caused to children, parents or staff.

Other aspects of contingency planning require to be addressed also however. If vouchers are to be used to fund provision, considerable uncertainty in the level of uptake from year to year is built into the system. Thus, for example, if provision is planned for 60 places but only 50 voucher-carrying children come forward, can the staffing resource for 60 places continue to be funded?

Similarly, if provision is planned for 60 places, but 70 voucher-carrying children come forward can the staffing resource for 60 places be augmented? (In this context members are reminded of the requirement for nursery provision to be staffed on the basis of 1 adult to a maximum of 10 children). In addressing this difficulty, a careful balance will require to be struck between, on the one hand, ensuring that the Council does not overstretch its financial resources by recruiting additional staff who turn out not to be required, and, on the other hand valuing staff sufficiently by offering them permanent contracts with reasonable job security rather than temporary contracts. Initially, all staff currently employed in pre-school activities, will continue to be employed on a similar basis and on the same terms and conditions as hitherto. In addition, it is anticipated that approximately 5 (fte) teachers and 9 (fte) nursery nurses will have to be recruited on a permanent basis with effect from August 1997. There may also be a requirement to ask some part-time staff to take on additional duties, temporarily, or to recruit additional staff on a part-time temporary basis if demand for places exceeds expectations in any given area in any given school year.

CRITERIA FOR IDENTIFYING SUITABLE PRE-SCHOOL PROVISION

In considering where and how pre-school education ought to be provided, it is inevitable that existing provision is considered first. As members know, Tayside Regional Council extended pre-school provision quite significantly between 1986 and 1996, and did so by creating nursery classes in primary schools which had sufficient accommodation to enable this to happen. Provision of pre-school education in nursery classes attached to primary schools has proved to be very successful and has been of inestimable benefit to the many children who have experienced it. Free-standing nursery schools are equally worthwhile, but no capital monies have been available to build such establishments for many years, and the current arrangements being effected by central government do not appear to hold out any hope whatsoever of capital expenditure becoming available. The current models in existence in Angus are therefore those on which further provision ought to build.

In the light of the way in which the voucher scheme seems set to operate, it is essential for any provider of pre-school education to be satisfied that a demand exists, and also to know what the level of that demand is likely to be. Over recent years, there has been ample evidence to suggest that the vast majority of parents do wish their children to benefit from the pre-school provision operated by the education authority here in Angus. The principal issue, therefore, is how many children are likely to present themselves in any given area.

Of the (approximately) 1400 pupils in each stage of primary education, roughly 80% attend a primary school within one of the seven burghs, and 20% attend one of the "rural" primary schools outwith these burghs.

As far as the seven burghs are concerned the proposals outlined in Appendix 1 would, if implemented, result in the following:

Arbroath	currently offers 240 places, and this would rise to 320 places
Brechin	currently offers 120 places, and this would rise to 140 places
Carnoustie	currently offers 120 places, and this would rise to 140 places
Forfar	would continue to offer 180 places
Kirriemuir	currently offers 100 places, and this would rise to 120 places
Monifieth	would continue to offer 120 places
Montrose	currently offers 140 places, and this would rise to 180 places

In total, burgh schools offer 1020 places, which would rise to 1200 places.

Currently "rural" schools, outwith the seven burghs, offer only 80 places, but in addition a peripatetic nursery service visits a total of 7 additional schools, each for 6 months at a time seeing at most 10 children for five 1/2 days per week. Unfortunately, the peripatetic model has some disadvantages, particularly for those communities which receive the service from August to February, after which the children require to wait a further 6 months before starting school. It is not proposed that the peripatetic service should continue, but rather that as many of the schools as possible which currently benefit from the service should provide year round provision, albeit for a very small number of children. The proposals in Appendix 1 would, if implemented, result in an increase in pre-school places in "rural" schools from 80 to 190 (including provision in or near to 6 of the 7 schools currently receiving a peripatetic service).

Accordingly, the first criterion which has been used is the likely level of parental demand, and proposals in Appendix 1 have been constructed on the assumption that

in any year, at least 90% of the places available in any one location will be filled by voucher-carrying children

Were any provision to be established which failed to attract voucher-carrying children to fill at least 90% of its places, then a significant unplanned financial burden would fall on the Council and this should be avoided. On the other hand, the Council will continue to have an obligation to provide for pre-school education of 3 year olds with Special Educational Needs, and a 90% uptake of voucher-carrying children would allow this obligation to be met.

The second criterion which has been used is:

that there is ample accommodation for a nursery class to function within school premises otherwise used for the provision of primary education.

This second criterion has resulted in a number of small and medium sized primary schools being rejected as unsuitable, as no capital monies are likely to be available to fund the extension or re-building which would be required.

PROVISION IN RURAL AREAS

In attempting to identify appropriate locations which match the practical criteria described above, little difficulty is encountered in the major population centres of Angus. However, the rural areas present significant difficulties. There are some 31 primary schools in Angus with rolls of less than 70 pupils, several of these with very small rolls indeed. None of these 31 schools is likely to have, on an annual basis as many as 10 pre-school children residing within the delineated area of the school, although **some may be able to attract 10 pre-school children annually from the wider hinterland of the school.**

In recent years, apart from the provision made by the peripatetic service, all new nursery classes formed have been based on an assumed number of at least 20 children attending at any given time. Were this to continue to be the approach adopted, no rural nurseries could be formed with any hope of meeting the financial requirements imposed by the voucher system or indeed with any expectation of a full or nearly full enrolment in any year. However, it is very likely that a number of schools could readily sustain nursery classes which aimed to provide pre-school education for 5 half-days per week throughout the year for no more than 10 children at a time. Appendix 1 contains proposals for 9 such nursery classes to be formed in total including Murroes Primary School which has operated such a provision for some years now. Such classes would be staffed by a nursery nurse who would work under the direct guidance of the head teacher of the school. Unlike other schools with nursery classes, an additional teacher would not normally be appointed to work directly with the nursery class, but some additional teaching support would be made available to the school to enable a high level of teacher input to be included in the planning and delivery of the nursery curriculum. Given the different physical lay-outs of the 9 schools concerned and also the different patterns of teacher deployment within schools, some flexibility in developing nursery provision in these schools is desirable. It is therefore recommended that the proposals for these 9 classes be treated as pilot arrangements, subject to an evaluation over the first year of their operation. It should also be emphasised that there will be an absolute commitment to ensuring that the quality of provision in all nurseries managed by the Council will be of the highest possible.

ENROLMENT ARRANGEMENTS

Each nursery class should have allocated to it a notional catchment area, and the catchment areas of all classes will combine to cover all residences within the boundaries of the Council. Notwithstanding this position, the present

arrangements whereby parents are able to seek enrolment for their children in any nursery will continue, subject to the prioritisation described in Appendix 2. In this context it should be noted that, at present, parents are required to take sole responsibility for transporting their children to and from nursery; since no additional funds are available from central government, this arrangement will continue.

The priority categories listed in Appendix 2 are consistent with the existing priorities, although the requirement to fund the provision from voucher income has meant a more rigorous test needs to be applied before any 3 year olds can be enrolled, and that age of child within the pre-school year is no longer an appropriate criterion for prioritisation. It is anticipated that the proportion of 3 years olds in Angus nurseries (currently around 10%) will drop to a slightly lower level as a result of this approach.

At present, a small number of vacant places are held in all nursery classes with 20 or more places to ensure an appropriate place can be made available to any child suddenly drawn to the attention of the education authority with Special Educational Needs; these places are held vacant normally until the October holiday. It is recommended that a similar practice continues, but that it is carefully monitored to ensure the legitimate needs of children with Special Educational Needs, and indeed of all children, are being met as fairly and equitably as possible. In this context, members should also note that traditional means of funding these pre-school SEN places are expected to continue.

PLANNING : JANUARY 1997 - AUGUST 1997

A major exercise of the type described will require significant central planning and coordination not envisaged when the departmental structure was approved by Council in 1995. Whilst it is hoped that some additional staff can be recruited in 1997/98, the cost of which should be off-set by voucher income, significant time will require to be devoted to planning in the current financial year if the proposals are to be implemented successfully. In order to allow this to happen it is proposed that a member of staff be seconded to a temporary post of "Pre-School Coordinator" initially for the period January - March 1997.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Although it is clear the voucher will carry a value of £1,100, and that it can be used to pay for five half-day sessions per week for a school year in a nursery school or class, the detailed financial arrangements for the voucher scheme are complex, and as yet little information has been forthcoming on this important dimension from the Scottish Office.

It is assumed that current pre-school provision supported by the existing funding arrangements can continue for the period April 1997 - June 1997. After August 1997, it is assumed that the revenue expenditure undertaken by the Council on pre-school provision will be off-set by income from vouchers.

In bringing forward future reports for Committee approval, a detailed examination of the financial implications of each proposal will be provided. At present the best available estimates suggest that the cost of implementing the proposals in Appendix 1 will be off-set by the income generated from vouchers to have an overall netural effect (ie there should be no additional costs to the Council).

The cost of seconding a member of staff to the post of Pre-School Coordinator for the period January - March 1997 is estimated to be £7000, and the cost can be met from the Education Department's Nursery Sector Revenue Budget for 1996/97.

CONSULTATION

This report has been the subject of consultation with the Chief Executive, the Director of Law and Administration, the Director of Finance, the Director of Property Services, the Director of Personnel and the Director of Social Work.

JIM ANDERSON
DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Note: No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information) were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report.

JAA/JN/LD

Appendices: 2

Proposed Pre-School Provision with effect from August 1997
All Places Are Assumed to be 5 half-days per week

	School	Current Provision		Additional Places		Total places proposed
		am	pm	am	pm	
Arbroath	Hayshead PS	30	30	/	/	60
	Muirfield PS	30	30	/	/	60
	Timmergreens PS	30	30	/	/	60
	Warddykes PS	30	30	/	/	60
	Inverbrothock PS	/	/	20	20	40
	Ladyloan PS	/	/	20	20	40
	Friockheim PS	/	/	/	20	20
	Inverkeilor PS	/	/	10	/	10
	Carmyllie PS	/	/	/	10	10
						<u>360</u>
Brechin	Townhead NS	60	60	10	10	140
	Edzell PS	/	/	/	10	10
						<u>150</u>
Carnoustie	Carlogie PS	30	30	10	10	80
	Kinloch PS	30	30	/	/	60
						<u>140</u>
Forfar	Chapelark PS	30	30	/	/	60
	Kirkriggs PS	30	30	/	/	60
	Langlands PS	30	30	/	/	60
	Letham PS	30	/	/	/	30
	Inverarity PS	/	/	10	/	10
						<u>220</u>
Kirriemuir	Northmuir PS	30	30	/	/	60
	Southmuir	20	20	10	10	60
	Airlie	/	/	10	/	10
	Tannadice	/	/	10	/	10
						<u>140</u>
Monifieth	Seaview PS	60	60	/	/	120
	Murroes PS	10	/	/	/	10
						<u>130</u>
Montrose	Borrowfield PS	30	30	/	/	60
	Ferryden PS	/	/	10	10	20
	Lochside PS	20	20	10	10	60
	Southesk PS	20	20	/	/	40
						<u>180</u>
Birkhill	Birkhill PS	20	20	10	10	60
	Newtyle SS	/	/	/	10	10
						<u>70</u>
						<u>1390</u>
						<u>1390</u>

Pre-School Provision - Enrolment of Children

Parents are invited to enrol pre-school children in the nursery class whose catchment area contains their normal place of residence. Any parent wishing to request a place in a nursery class other than that serving her/his normal place of residence is free to do so, and that request will be granted if it is possible to do so in terms of the prioritisation process described below.

If there are more children seeking places in a nursery than there are places available priority will be accorded as follows:

- Priority 1 Children in their pre-school year * with a voucher whose normal place of residence is within the catchment area of the nursery.
- Priority 2 Children in their pre-school year * with a voucher whose normal place of residence lies outwith the catchment area of the nursery.

- * (Notes
- a) Parents of a child in the pre-school year will require to produce a voucher to support their child's enrolment, and the continued enrolment of that child will be subject to satisfactory arrangements being in place to cash that voucher at whatever intervals are agreed between the Council and the government. No final enrolments will be undertaken until the voucher is made available to the Council.
 - b) If it is necessary to prioritise within Priority Category 2, priority will be given firstly to any child normally resident within Angus over any child resident outwith Angus. Thereafter, if it is still necessary to prioritise further within Category 2, the single criterion of distance from the nursery to the child's normal place of residence will be used with highest priority given to children living closest to the nursery).

- Priority 3 Children not in their pre-school year ** whose normal place of residence is within the catchment area of the nursery.
- Priority 4 Children not in their pre-school year ** whose normal place of residence is outwith the catchment area of the nursery.

- ** (Notes
- a) If it is necessary to prioritise within either Category 3 or Category 4, then priority should be given to oldest children first
 - b) Given the requirement to maximise income from vouchers, children in Priority Categories 3 and 4 will not normally be enrolled in nurseries until 1st September of the nursery year).

Each nursery will hold a register of names of children who have been unsuccessful in obtaining a place and places will be offered to children on that register throughout the year as and when they become available. Children who are enrolled for a place in one Council nursery will not normally be eligible to remain on the register of names for any other nursery.

Normally all voucher carrying applicants for nursery places will have their applications acknowledged initially, with final confirmation being given on a pre-determined date in mid/late May.