

13 October 2023

Dear Sir/Madam

### **AMALGAMATION OF PRE-SCHOOL CLASSES – PILOT PROGRAMME**

CSSC welcomes the opportunity to provide further comment on the Department's pilot programme to effect the standardisation of pre-school session times. CSSC has engaged with the leaders of controlled settings to inform this response.

CSSC notes that of the 12 settings invited to participate in the pilot programme communicated in Autumn 2022: -

- three of the settings will proceed with the new arrangements on a permanent basis.
- three settings will not proceed, mainly due to the need for capital investment.
- two have confirmed their intention to participate for September 2024; and
- four are still considering whether they wish to request a change.

CSSC is conscious that of the three settings which have been able to participate in the pilot programme for 2023/24, two of those settings are controlled settings. CSSC is encouraged by the positive experience of the pilot programme for those two settings, The Academy Nursery School and Belmont Nursery School, which reported the following benefits for staff and pupils.

- A significant reduction in the number of penultimate age children and the need to respond to toileting needs.
- The children are ready for the pre-school curriculum.
- The ability to ensure an equal distribution of children with SEN in both full-time classes thus supporting the adult response to all children.
- More enjoyable, less rushed experience of delivering the pre-school curriculum.
- The introduction of a lunchtime for all pupils is considered a learning opportunity and a further opportunity to encourage socialisation skills.
- More time created for effective team working with managing two full-time classes rather than four part-time classes. Where previously staff would not have been able to plan and evaluate provision together until after 3pm, they are able to do so earlier in the day, at a time which is more conducive to collaboration and creativity.

CSSC is conscious, however, that standardisation was facilitated in both settings because no capital investment was required (a key criteria for participation) and both settings operated a mixed pattern of provision and therefore had accommodation that was able to meet the demands of an extended school day, specifically the need to provide school lunches.

Engagement with other controlled settings confirms that the concerns raised by CSSC in our initial response regarding the pilot programme persist and include, but are not limited to, concerns around the absence of capital investment and the impact of reduced funding (see Appendix 1). CSSC will take this opportunity to address some of these issues again with a view to reflecting the current context for controlled nursery schools and nursery units.

### **Addressing the challenges settings face in meeting the needs of disproportionate numbers of penultimate age children**

The positive experience of the pilot for two controlled schools referred to in this response emphasises the positive impact of the programme in addressing the disproportionate number of penultimate age children in both schools and allowing them to focus on delivering an age-appropriate pre-school curriculum which also enhances the schools' ability to focus on meeting the needs of children with Special Educational Needs. CSSC has raised the challenges posed for controlled schools in meeting the needs of penultimate age children in various consultation responses to both the Department and the Education Authority (EA) and the settings invited to participate in the pilot were settings with an historic enrolment pattern indicative of over-provision typified by enrolment of 15 or more penultimate aged pupils in three of the last five years. The issue of responding to the needs of high numbers of penultimate age children at the expense of the educational experience of target age children persists and the willingness of many of these settings to engage with the programme is still prevented by the absence of capital investment to support the pilot programme.

### **Support to explore school readiness and the need for capital investment.**

Controlled schools keen to explore participation in the pilot programme for 2023/24 were disappointed at the support provided to explore this opportunity from some EA services due to lack of information they had about the pilot and its aims. One school leader noted that the LMS officer knew nothing about the pilot and, while happy to discuss potential budgetary implications with the principal, would not commit anything to paper which would have supported the principal in conversations with governors.

EA Catering Services also responded to news of the pilot with surprise and one school has noted that their aspiration of participating in the pilot for 2024/25 is again thwarted by the lack of funding available to EA Catering Services to resource the school lunches required for full-time provision. This is prohibitive, despite the proximity of the setting to a controlled primary school which already provides school dinners for other neighbouring schools.

It is crucial that settings are supported to consider the implications of participation in the programme at every level and this includes support to assess the implications for the school's budget of a reduced AWPU for participating schools. One of the settings able to participate this year reported a reduction in funding of £28,000 yet they were able to proceed by making adjustments, such as employing one less general classroom assistant and reducing the hours of secretarial support available to the school. The school also reported that savings were achieved through resourcing one less class because of the amalgamation of two part-time classes. Support to consider the options available to settings to mitigate the impact of reduced funding is crucial to allow for an informed decision and should be available from all relevant services.

### **Unintended consequences of the pilot programme**

The communication of the pilot programme to local private/voluntary pre-school providers, naming the statutory providers invited to participate in the pilot programme, had the unintended consequence of reportedly causing private/voluntary providers in two areas to consider actions to mitigate the potential loss of pupils to the statutory providers. Private/voluntary providers increased the duration of pre-school session times and/or introduce a free packed lunch for the children attending. Both schools, unable to proceed with the pilot in 2023/24, and unlikely to be able to proceed in 2024/25 due to the continued need for capital investment, believe that this early communication created a situation where again they were unable to compete with what private/voluntary providers were able to offer parents, leading to an increased number of penultimate age children admitted for 2023/24 while the private/voluntary settings were able to admit target age children.

Statutory providers are conscious that parents' need for extended hours to facilitate their access to employment can influence their choices of pre-school provision as an extended day is an attractive option for working parents. While voluntary/private providers can meet this demand the statutory sector cannot. The consequence of this is that statutory settings are more likely to be left with available places that are inevitably filled with penultimate age children.

## **Expanding the pilot programme informed by survey responses of all PSEP providers**

CSSC acknowledges the significant contribution that this pilot programme will make to informing the roll out of standardised pre-school session lengths for all providers. CSSC is conscious of the many benefits of full-time pre-school session classes for the child and would refer the Department to CSSC's response to the DE's consultation on the removal of the social deprivation criteria for pre-school admissions in which CSSC highlighted the potential opportunities and challenges presented by standardisation to full-time hours (see Appendix 2). The experiences of The Academy Nursery School and Belmont Nursery School demonstrate how standardisation can improve the experience of every child and create better working conditions for staff. The need to reduce the number of penultimate age children in the system and to focus attention on age-appropriate pre-school education is well known and endorsed by the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement, with the need to legislate to redefine pre-school age included as an action in the Final Report, A Fair Start. The potential cost-savings to the Department in reducing the number of pre-school places allocated to penultimate age children needs to be considered alongside the capital investment required to permit settings educating disproportionate numbers of penultimate age children to participate in the pilot.

CSSC is conscious that a number of Development Proposals to establish or expand pre-school provision have been published since the commencement of the pilot programme, some for part-time and some for full-time provision. These proposals have significant resource implications. Standardisation of the Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) is a significant policy development which will change the existing pattern of provision. In this context, CSSC recommends that proposals which will impact upon future pre-school provision should not be progressed until the outcomes of the pilot programme are determined and a strategy is agreed which will realise the aspiration for all our children to access a full-time pre-school education, regardless of the type of setting they attend.

CSSC is conscious of the scoping study carried out by the Department to help inform planning for the standardisation of the PSEP and would very much welcome the opportunity to learn what DE has established from the survey regarding the readiness of all PSEP providers for standardisation. Currently those settings unable to progress due to capital investment considerations are discouraged by the barriers to their participation in the pilot programme and doubt the ability of the system to support widespread standardisation if the minor investment required by their settings cannot be supported. CSSC is keen to receive an update from DE in respect of the survey and, specifically, how the data captured from the survey will inform the progression of plans to expand the pilot programme and ensure that the Ministerial aspiration of full-time provision for all children is realised.



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CSSC would be happy to discuss this response and arrange a meeting to discuss the outcomes of the survey.

Yours faithfully,

Mr Mark Baker  
Chief Executive