



4 Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This is the first time a national audit has been conducted of provision targeting disadvantage and special needs among children in the birth to six age group, across all sectors, and one for which no central data currently exist.

The research design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative elements. The quantitative aspect of the research design had three elements:

- 1 The specific items of information required were determined, and an Information Template was devised (Appendix 1).
- 1 The Information Template and accompanying letter (Appendix 2) were piloted.
- 1 Finally the main Audit was carried out. This proceeded on the basis of the findings of the pilot phase, and, while focused on

quantitative data, also included a qualitative strand.

In terms of the qualitative component, study visits were undertaken to get a broader perspective on the nature of provision, and on the range of initiatives involved in targeted services. This strand was conceptualised as offering a window on the range of approaches and possibilities for children in the targeted groups. An interview schedule (Appendix 3) was formulated for use on the study visits.

4.1.1 Information Template

The Information Template was devised to structure the information gathering process and to present the items of required information in concise form, using both open ended and closed questions. The purpose of the template was to determine how services

target disadvantage and special needs, for what length of time per day parents can access these services and which age groups of children are catered for within the birth to six age range. It included the following sections:

1 Name and contact details of the service. This first item concerned basic details relating to location so that services could be mapped and quantified. Individual services would not be identified in the final Audit document.

1 Description of the service. This item addressed the basic division between full day and sessional services which exists within the two main categories of disadvantage and special needs. Information was requested on the age range of the children accessing the service with a view to rounding out the overall picture of the completeness of provision.

1 Purpose of service. Given the audit's specification of services to alleviate disadvantage or for children with special needs, the third item was included to ascertain how services defined their efforts in either of these areas. Prompts were included for this category, which were intended to give guidance without being prescriptive.

4.2 Phase 1 - Pilot Process

As there was no identifiable precedent or model for gathering the specific items of information necessary to illustrate the categories of targeted interventions, a pilot process was devised. Its purpose, in the first instance, was to establish if the Information Template would supply consistent information in usable form. The second function of the pilot was to assess the level of information held by groups with an involvement with either of the two basic categories in the audit,

and to test whether the Information Template matched the format of that information. The final function of the pilot was to determine, on the basis of the responses, the most productive sources – in structural terms – of the required information. Possible sources of information were conceptualised on a continuum; national structures, or bodies with a national profile of involvement; intermediary structures, or those with regional involvement; local structures or groups; and individual providers.

In order to pilot the Information Template and accompanying letter, both were forwarded to 38 Partnership Companies in November 2002. Partnership Companies were identified as intermediary structures likely to have information on services targeting children experiencing disadvantage, given their location '*... in areas of very high unemployment with high levels of multiple economic and social deprivation.*' (Butler, 2002:2) Given their involvement with community groups, Partnerships might be expected to hold basic information about the various types of targeted early intervention services in their area. If the Partnership did not maintain details of the services, the letter requested that contact details of groups involved with provision in their area be returned so that they could be contacted directly. The response to the initial contact was quite slow, and a reminder letter (Appendix 4) with specific return date was sent. Eight Partnership Companies in all responded with information. Responses ranged from comprehensive datasets to individual replies. These responses indicated

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that where data collection had taken place, the ensuing data sets provided the kind of coverage, which would make a national audit feasible. Individual responses were also received. These had not been requested, but it appears that the providers in question had received the template from the local Partnership and had responded. Several issues became apparent from a consideration of the responses.

4.2.1 Post Pilot Revisions

Issue 1. Responses came in very slowly, and continued to come in even after the Pilot phase had ended.

Recommendation 1. A specific timeframe for the collection of data would be necessary.

Issue 2. While some individual providers responded, and took great care in doing so, the numbers were not significant.

Recommendation 2. Data should not be sought from individual providers but from sources of large datasets.

No overarching national set of criteria exists. There are, however, many initiatives which have been established to tackle different manifestations of disadvantage or special needs, and each of these structures has its own brief and rationale.

Issue 3. Of the eight Partnerships who responded, several included comprehensive lists of all the early childhood services in their area. Some lists also included information related to items 2 and 3 on the

Information Template. When these data lists were added to the Audit database the additions were quantitatively significant, a basic requirement of the audit.

Recommendation 3. The audit must focus on accessing data sets gathered by national and intermediary structures as the most efficient method of gathering quantitative information.

Issue 4. The final, and perhaps most

significant issue which arose, was that of establishing the nature of a 'targeted service' and the criteria used to define such targeting. This question of criteria had arisen initially on foot of several responses from individual providers who 'self identified' as addressing disadvantage or special needs. None of these providers indicated an affiliation to any group whose remit would give a reference point for including the service in one or other category. It became apparent that it would be necessary to identify each service we included in the audit by reference to a group, structure or organisation whose remit is to target disadvantage or special needs, and which has identifiable criteria or a specific rationale.

This last point begs the question of how to establish such criteria. No overarching national set of criteria exists. There are, however, many initiatives which have been established to tackle different manifestations of disadvantage or special needs, and each of these structures has its own brief and rationale. It was neither appropriate nor feasible for the CECDE to set about devising criteria for this project, as our brief is to audit existing provision.

Recommendation 4. Each entry in the audit would have to be supported by reference to an organisation or structure with established criteria and a specific brief to target either disadvantage or special needs.

4.3 Phase 2 - Main Audit

4.3.1 National Structures

On the basis of points 3 and 4 above, sources of large datasets with associated criteria related to targeting disadvantage and special needs were identified. ADM and the DES were identified as the major national structures from whom to access national data.

ADM supplied a major database of services accessing Staffing Grants under the EOCP, and the DES supplied lists of all schools involved in the various schemes, which target educational disadvantage in primary schools.

4.3.2 Intermediary Structures

Following the completion of the pilot phase, the Information Template remained unchanged, but the accompanying letter was amended to include a return date. The Information Template and amended letter were circulated to all identified intermediary organisations, committees, groups and bodies involved with or related to early childhood services at the beginning of January 2003. These groups were identified in a variety of ways – literature reviews, internet searches and consultation within the sector. These included the CCCs, Health Boards, RAPID Co-ordinators, the NVCOs and special needs groups with a national profile, such as Enable Ireland and the Brothers of Charity. The template and letter were circulated electronically and by post. Additionally, as opportunities arose over subsequent months at seminars and training courses, the template and letter were distributed in person.

Following the return deadline, the level of response from each county was assessed. Where gaps were identified, follow up contact via mail or telephone took place. The criteria used to determine the point at which adequate information had been received for an individual county were as follows; ADM lists, DES lists, Health Board notified services lists, and a response from one other intermediary group such as a CCC or Partnership. Once this level of information had been achieved it was then processed. Most counties achieved this basic level of

information return between the February 14th deadline and the end of April when information gathering was concluded.

4.4 Study Visits

As has been outlined in the Rationale, quantitative data are necessary for planning and development. It would not, however, be a true reflection of the commitment, diversity and work of practitioners here to confine the Audit to a quantitative exercise. Consequently, a qualitative aspect was included in the research design. This qualitative aspect was centred on a series of study visits, which were undertaken to a wide range and variety of locations and services. Prior to the commencement of the study visits an Interview Schedule was devised. This consisted of five open-ended questions which could be used in a variety of contexts to structure the study visits. These visits were not evaluative in any way. In order to present the experience of the study visits, Pen Pictures were chosen as the most appropriate way to include this qualitative element into the audit. The topics and services drawn on for the four Pen Pictures illustrate various aspects of the Audit, rather than a comprehensive picture of all aspects of ECCE in Ireland.

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4.5 Conclusion

The Audit sought to gather mainly quantitative data to enumerate services, which target children at risk of or experiencing disadvantage and children with special needs. However the Audit also included a qualitative aspect, which sought to leaven this with descriptive material.