

Population and Migration Statistics Committee (Scotland)

Local Authority Side

Pre-school population estimates – Education Requirements

1. The Education Department of the Scottish Executive sent a letter to all Directors of Education on 26th September this year entitled “Re-integration of Pre-school Education Funding – Implications for Policy and Practice”. This report deals mainly with the provision of pre-school education. However, Annex C, entitled “Data Collection and Performance Assessment” begins with two paragraphs on “Population Data”.
2. The first of these states: “Fundamental to effective use of the grant resources will be the availability of good data on the population to be served. Until now, the Department has provided each authority with annual estimates prepared by GRO of the number of 3 & 4 year olds resident in each area during the relevant school year. **From autumn this year, it will be for each authority to approach GRO direct for the latest population estimates.** Whilst cohort data covering pre-school children is available from the GRO website, this is not re-based to the school years: population adjusted to school session needs to be sought separately from GRO. **This is a priority.** In past years, where authorities have had reservations over the GRO figures, we have discussed these with them and with GRO. For the future, authorities will need to refer any concerns they have direct to GRO.” The sentences in bold type are as they appear in the Executive’s letter.
3. The information contained in this Annex was only brought to GROS’ attention by one of the local authorities. They have in the past, supplied information on pre-school children for the school year by shifting a proportion of the 3 year olds back to the 2’s; 4s back to 3s and 5s back to 4s based on the monthly distribution of births and dates specified by the Scottish Executive.
4. GRO are obviously anxious to avoid receiving 32 separate requests from local authorities for, potentially, 32 separate pieces of information and different date specifications. It would be more appropriate for them to produce one set of populations all based on the same period, which could then be made available to local authorities. It would also be more appropriate from the point of view of making comparisons between councils to be using the same basic data.
5. There are a number of issues which this matter raises. Firstly, producing these figures means that there will be two separate “official” estimates of the number of children in these age groups – the mid year estimates of population and these additional estimates to meet the requirements of the Scottish Executive Education Department.
6. Secondly, the new figures will in practice be very little different from the mid year estimate figures – so is it worth while producing them? Is the difference likely to be significant in the use which is made of them? Does the difference outweigh the level of accuracy in the figures?
7. Thirdly, GROS have always advised us that the reliability of the mid year estimates is less for single year of age data than for aggregated figures. However, single year of age data are likely to be more accurate at these age ranges because of the minimal effect of deaths and migration and the accuracy of the births data.
8. Fourthly, it is not clear what dates the Scottish Executive are looking at. Do they mean children who will be eligible to start school in August of a particular year – e.g. children starting school this year (2001) will have their 5th birthdays between 1st March 2001 and 28th February

2002? Or do they mean the children who will be, for example, 5 years old at the start of the school term in August - with the variable starting dates among different local authorities?

9. Fifthly, it is not obvious that the Scottish Executive have made a clear distinction between population estimates and projections. The latest mid year population estimates refer to mid year 2000. So the number of, for example, 3 year olds in these estimates will by now be 4. To plan for future pre-school provision, we need to know how many 3 and 4 year olds there will be next year and in future years. Depending on the time horizon in question we may require population estimates, projections or a mixture of both.
10. GRO are now co-operating with the Scottish Executive's Education Department to produce revised guidance for local authorities on this issue. They are looking for assistance from us on what it is reasonable to put in that guidance.
11. One of the purposes of the new PAMS set up is to encourage discussion on issues such as this. You are therefore asked to consider the following:
 - (i) Is there a requirement for a set of figures for pre-school children (or indeed school age children) re-based to the school year?
 - (ii) If so, what is meant by "the school year"?
 - (iii) Are these figures required as current estimates and/or projections?
 - (iv) Is there a requirement for a new set of figures to be produced each year?
 - (v) How should these figures be made available to local authorities?
 - (vi) The more general question of whether there should be alternative sets of mid year estimates and/or projections produced by GROs to meet specific requirements, and if there are, what is the status of these figures in relation to the mid year estimates and projections that are currently produced.
12. It may be that this is too big an issue to come to any conclusions at this meeting. If so, we need to consider how to take the matter forward through PAMS.
13. If however, our opinion is that there is a requirement for figures for pre-school children, you are asked to approve, for further discussion at the full meeting of PAMS:
 - (i) GROs producing a standard set of figures each year to meet the needs of the Executive and ourselves as discussed above;
 - (ii) That PAMS, agrees a consistent approach and writes to the Scottish Executive Education Department informing them of our decision and expressing our concerns about how this matter has been handled.
 - (iii) Revised guidance being issued by the Scottish Executive Education Department, taking into account our advice, as a matter of urgency in order to clarify the matter.
14. You may wish to consult colleagues in your own Education Service before coming to the meeting. However, the PAMS Committee is meant to provide the expertise on population matters, and we should therefore be in a position to take a view on the more general issues which this particular problem has raised.

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Date: 12th November 2001