



# Interchange 68

All Day Provision for 3- and 4-Year Olds



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# All Day Provision for 3- and 4-Year Olds

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## 1. Introduction

In 1999 a team of researchers from the Institute of Education at the University of Stirling was commissioned by the Scottish Executive Education Department to research the experiences of 3- and 4-year olds who have all-day provision in pre-school education and care settings. The study focused exclusively on what constitutes **good all-day provision** rather than a comparison of all- and part-day provision. When the project was commissioned there was increasing demand for provision to meet the needs of working parents and a recognition that, although there had been a rapid expansion in part-time pre-school education provision, this may not meet demands for provision from working parents.

At the time of the study all-day pre-school provision in Scotland was available in what was characterised as a 'mixed economy' of education and care services for young children and their parents. Each 3- and 4-year old was offered 12½ hours of government-funded pre-school education per week in registered settings (in the private, local authority and voluntary sectors). Some of these settings offered an all-day service and parents were also able to 'build' all-day provision from a combination of settings, perhaps a nursery class during the morning followed by an afternoon spent with a childminder, or at a private nursery. The *Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5* (SCCC, 1999) set out the areas of experience and learning to which the pre-school child should have access. This *Framework* did not make any specific recommendations for all-day provision as such but was a statement of good pre-school practice and of the expectations of provision in receipt of government funding.

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## 2. Aims And Approach To The Research

This project aimed to explore the nature of all-day provision for 3- and 4-year olds through the experiences of children, their parents and pre-school providers and practitioners. It set out to investigate the features of provision that parents and providers considered necessary to meet the needs of families and to offer children satisfactory experiences. Ensuring that young children's experiences in all-day provision are satisfactory is fundamental to concerns about all-day provision. It was therefore important to investigate this directly, through observation of children's time in the playroom and conversations with them about their experiences. Four questions were central to the research.

### Research Questions

1. *What patterns of activity and behaviour occur in a variety of settings where 3- and 4-year olds have all-day provision?*
2. *What counts as a satisfactory all-day experience from the perspective of providers, practitioners, parents, and children?*
3. *What factors seem to be important in influencing the 'success' of all-day provision from the perspectives of the different stakeholders?*
4. *What are the specific issues that have to be addressed if all-day provision is to be further developed in line with SEED policy?*

#### (i) The Research

The emphasis in the study was on reporting and analysing the experiences of the adults and children (43 in total) involved in **eight case study settings**. All of these settings were involved in Childcare Partnerships and offered government-funded places but operated under different conditions and offered children different daily programmes. The research endeavoured to reflect this diversity while identifying matters of common concern.

Four settings were identified in each of two local authority (LA) areas with different geographic and socio-economic profiles. These case study settings (2 private nurseries, 2 LA centres, a playgroup, wraparound provision and 2 nursery classes) were categorised for the purposes of the study as **main providers**. Some of the children identified had all-day provision with the main provider while others received all-day provision by a combination of sessions with the main provider and further time with one or more **additional providers** (either another group care setting or a childminder or nanny).

#### (ii) Interviews and observations

The perspectives of the adults (parents, providers, practitioners and LA respondents) were gathered by semi-structured interviews. Two approaches were used to explore the children's experience of all-day provision: talking to children about their experience and observing them in the playroom to record their activities and behaviour. The observations of behaviour were categorised into those indicating a positive or negative affective state. Line drawings of 'faces' (happy, sad, sleepy, cross/angry) and a book of pictures of a nursery day were used as prompts in the conversations with children.

#### (iii) Survey of local authorities

In addition to the case studies of individual settings, a survey of local authorities was carried out. Local authorities played a major role in all-day care and education through direct provision of pre-school education, regulation of providers across the sectors and their leading role in the partnership arrangements that managed the provision of government-funded places. The 12 authorities selected to participate in the survey were chosen to offer a mix of locations and a varied history of pre-school provision. The sample encompassed urban areas (some with large inner city populations), suburban populations, rural localities (with scattered populations) and some areas with a mix of urban and rural settings.

### 3. Findings

#### (i) The nature of all-day provision in the case study settings

In the case study settings the availability of all-day provision varied across sectors.

- Private group care providers offered longer hours each day and were open for more of the year.
- Childminders and nannies cared for children beyond the hours available in most LA or private group care settings.
- The voluntary sector setting offered only a term time, morning session.
- At local authority settings provision beyond 9 am - 3 p.m. and during school holidays was limited.
- All-day provision was only available at some local authority provision if the family met certain 'in need' criteria.

Case study settings used accommodation that varied from a room in a private house, through purpose-built premises for LA nursery classes and schools to shared use of a village hall for the playgroup. A number of features were characteristic of the accommodation used:

- All-day children typically shared playrooms with children attending only for sessions (morning or afternoon) or until 3 pm.
- Furniture and equipment had to be re-arranged during each day to allow for meals and snacks to be served.
- All settings had outside play space but this varied in accessibility and equipment.
- No dedicated space to sleep or rest was set aside for 3- and 4-year olds staying all-day.

Whether children attended for sessions or stayed all-day, providers and practitioners considered the pre-school provision they offered to be a distinct educational stage, not just a preparation for school. The emphasis placed on meeting children's social and emotional needs and promoting their educational development varied across individual providers and practitioners. In general:

- Providers and practitioners offering group care considered that meeting the requirements of the *Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5* was essential for satisfactory all-day provision. Staff in all the case study settings aimed to establish close relationships with families and considered it essential to offer variety in the activities and equipment offered during all-day provision.
- Childminders and nannies did not feel bound by curriculum guidelines, arguing that the children had received the necessary educational

provision elsewhere. They aimed to respond to children's requests and to allow them to play freely when they cared for them after they had been to other provision.

#### (ii) Providers' and practitioners' perspectives on all-day provision

No one model of all-day provision was advocated but group care practitioners articulated conditions necessary for satisfactory provision:

- effective curriculum planning and observation of children;
- differentiation of activities for 3- and 4- year olds;
- communicating with parents in a way which suits them;
- ensuring staff continuity and low staff turnover;
- consideration of the requirements that arise from the 'all-dayness' of the child's experience (e.g. need for a change of pace, time outside);
- offering an appropriate environment and resources.

Childminders, nannies and staff in group care settings were in agreement that children needed a shift to a different style or atmosphere towards the end of the day. In group care settings this tended to be a move towards more adult attention and more directed activities while in home-based care it was a move to children choosing their own activities.

#### *Staff in the case study settings suggested all-day provision had implications for*

- *The daily programme (e.g. offering a change of pace, appropriate activities at the end of the day)*
- *Accommodation and resources*
- *Staffing*
- *Communication with other providers.*

#### *They saw no problems arising specifically from all-day provision in terms of*

- *Mixing 3- and 4-year olds in one playroom*
- *Transition to primary schools*
- *Gender issues*
- *Meeting the expectations of families.*

**Providers and practitioners were ambivalent in their evaluation of the child's experience of all-day provision.** Many staff recognise the developmental benefits that particular children derived from spending time in nursery beyond half-day sessions. A significant number considered that, for

Practitioners did not argue for one model of provision but did suggest that some conditions had to be met. Do you consider these conditions to be important? Does your setting meet these conditions?

most children, the impact of all-day provision depended on both the nature of the child and the nature of the provision. Three respondents argued in favour of all-day provision but more than twice that number (from all three sectors) suggested that all-day provision had negative implications for children (such as missing out on time at home or with parents, not having individual attention from one adult), although some saw benefits for parents.

### (iii) Children's Activities

In each setting children chose activities from those set out in the room by practitioners who were following curriculum guidelines and established practice. **There were no significant differences between settings in the kind of activities that children selected in free play.** Physical play was a regular activity either as a whole group activity or as a popular choice during free play in settings where there was ready access to outdoor play space. Group activities were a frequent part of children's experience in most settings.

In each setting children were offered activities and learning opportunities that were selected to cover the areas of the curriculum set out in the *Curriculum Framework* but children's own choices defined their experience on any one day. In all settings group activities were used to complement or supplement the range of curriculum areas that children experienced in free play.

Observations suggested that children shaped their own curriculum through their choices, although practitioners tried to balance that with group activities. Should practitioners try to balance the curriculum or allow children to shape their own experience?

***Particular kinds of learning experiences dominated some children's experiences while others were involved in a broad range of learning experiences.***

- *Children were more likely to be involved in developing manipulative and creative skills, learning by listening, watching and looking and developing life skills.*
- *Learning by sorting, categorising, matching and sequencing, by involvement in group games or musical activities or physical or imaginative play seldom dominated children's playroom experience.*
- *Activities to develop life skills were a dominant feature of some children's experience in the playroom. There was some evidence that this kind of activity was related to playroom routine.*

What kinds of learning experiences do children in your setting choose?  
Could some children be observed as 'not engaged' at times?

Settings varied in the frequency with which children were observed as 'not engaged'. Features of the playroom and of daily routines e.g. the degree of structure imposed by adults may have contributed to this variation, along with factors associated with a particular child.

The evidence (across settings) does not suggest any clear difference between 3- and 4- year olds in the activities they were engaged in nor was there any evidence of gender differences in the activities children were engaged in.

**Each case study setting offering all-day provision attempted to offer something different when a smaller number of children remained at the end of the day.**

In group settings children were involved in more adult-directed activities at the end of the day but child-minders want children to be free to choose what to do at the end of the day.

What do you consider appropriate for 3-and 4-year olds at the end of day?

- Typically in all-day group care settings children were gathered together towards the end of the day when adults led a selected activity (often described as a ‘quieter activity’.)
- Only at the Wraparound setting did children experience a different environment at the end of the day. At other all-day settings they tended to move to a specific part of the playroom at the end of the day.
- The emphasis at Wraparound was on giving choice at the end of the day but at other group settings choice tended to be more restricted during the last part of the day.

**For children who received all-day provision from a combination of providers the way in which they spent their time at the additional provision depended on whether that setting offered group or home-based care.**

You may have children in your nursery who attend other provision too. What do you know, or do you want to know, about how they spend their time there? Could you make arrangements to find out?

What kind of exchange would be purposeful and manageable?

- When their additional provision was a group care setting children were offered activities and learning opportunities across the ‘*Framework*’ areas. Children’s choices with their additional provider reflected their particular interests (e.g. they might choose creative activities at both their main and additional provider) and the opportunities available in that setting (e.g. large block play or free play outside).
- Children cared for by a nanny or childminder were not offered planned activities but they were involved in some of the same types of activities as available in the playroom (e.g. role play, physical play, baking). Play resources were more limited at nanny or childminder settings but children were more involved in negotiating play possibilities with the adult there.

**(iv) Parents’ Perspectives**

Parents were asked about their requirements for all-day provision in terms of the location of provision, the hours needed, and the costs involved. Their views can be summarised as follows.

- Across settings a convenient location was helpful, although not the most important requirement. However, if care was shared with a childminder or grandparents then the location had to be convenient for them.
- Getting a good match between the hours offered by providers and each working family’s needs was crucial.
- While some families would have appreciated an earlier starting time there was more concern about the time at which nurseries closed.
- In general, parents using private provision were prepared to pay for what they felt was a good quality service that allowed them to work.
- Some parents used private nurseries in combination with other provision to maximise the hours available and minimise the cost.

- Reaction to the cost of local authority provision varied with family financial circumstances. Some described the costs as reasonable but for others they were difficult to manage.

Additional evidence revealed that, in a rural setting with LA and private provision only available in a town some miles away, informal arrangements were used (often with family members) in addition to playgroup sessions to cover parents' working hours.

***Parents' expectations for all-day provision included***

- *the promotion of their child's social development and cognitive development*
- *an emphasis on learning through fun (a few) or pre-school as preparation for school (a larger number)*
- *their children should be active at nursery with a choice of activities*
- *their children should be safe and well cared for*

***Among those using more than one provider, LA provision was expected to be more 'educational' and formal.***

***Parents using Wraparound sought a more relaxed and cosy time there after nursery had ended.***

**Parents tended to have preferences for a particular type of provision.** The evidence gathered in this study suggested that a single model of all-day provision would not suit all parents. Some had a preference for local authority provision and they had divided views on childminding. Some saw group care as safer and better for social development. Others preferred the individual attention that childminders could give. In general, being able to achieve the hours needed at a manageable cost was the major influence on choice but other factors were involved too. Some parents thought that a change of location during the day was a positive feature that 'broke the day up'. Both the nursery's reputation and the parents' impression of the atmosphere on their initial visit were influential.

**Parents who were satisfied with the provision they used far outnumbered those who mentioned any dissatisfaction.** There were two dimensions to their satisfaction with provision:

- the match between the service available and the needs of their working lives;
- the way in which they perceived their child's experience away from home.

Most parents were satisfied with the particular type of provision they had access to and the hours during which it was available. They were more likely to comment negatively on the hours of provision available than on the location of the service they used. Cost was a factor influencing satisfaction, but most parents in the sample were managing to cope with the charges imposed and a few would have been willing to pay for more hours. Notions of what was an acceptable cost varied according to family income. Parents were **universally confident** that their child enjoyed the time they spent in all-day

Parents were satisfied with the provision they used and confident that their child enjoyed being there. What evidence have you gathered about the way which parents make judgements about your provision?

care and that the child felt happy and secure there. Moments when children expressed some dissatisfaction or reluctance to attend nursery were considered to be fleeting or due to a temporary state and did not appear to challenge parents' judgements that provision was satisfactory.

(v) The perspective of 3- and 4-year olds

**The observations of children and the conversations with them suggested that their experience of all-day provision was predominantly satisfactory, regardless of the type of provision they experienced.** There was no evidence to suggest that 3-year olds were more vulnerable or experienced less satisfaction than 4-year olds.

In the case study settings children were observed engaged in activities they had chosen from the range made available by adults or joining in group activities and games. The degree of individual variation in the learning activities selected during free play suggested that a **broad range of activities was necessary** in the playroom in order to maximise individual children's satisfaction. Observations in the playroom suggested that children were able to make choices in free play time that gave them satisfaction and that they were willing to be involved in the kind of group experiences offered, for instance they were generally enthusiastic about outdoor play or group games indoors.

It is more difficult to make inferences about the experience of children who were observed to be 'not engaged' or wandering for varying periods of time. They may have been dissatisfied with the choice available to them at that time, or with their experience in that setting in general. Alternatively they may have been exercising a positive choice to have 'time out'. **Children were not noticeably more tired or less willing to be involved in adult-led activities later in the day.**

Children were able to express preferences and talk about their experiences.

Should children be consulted in the settings you are responsible for?

**Conversations with children confirmed that they had preferences about the way in which they spent their time while in all-day provision.** They expected to play and were able to identify activities that would give them satisfaction. The activities that they talked about were 'free play' activities, not group activities. Most children indicated that they were happy at nursery and not sleepy, sad or cross. They said that they might be cross when they were not able to have things they wanted and sad when hurt. A few children acknowledged that they got tired at nursery. Other children were a source of satisfaction and fun, e.g. some children talked about enjoying jokes together and laughing with others. Occasionally other children were a source of dissatisfaction, annoyance or hurt. Nevertheless, adults were clearly important for the 3- and 4-year olds. Many of the observations of children in a positive affective state recorded them listening or responding to adults and interacting socially with them. The children needed adults to comfort them when they were sad, help them to cope when they were cross and to notice when they were tired.

## (vi) The Perspective of Local Authorities

The evidence gathered from the survey suggested that:

- One third of the authorities surveyed offered little or no direct LA all-day provision.
- Authorities either offered direct all-day provision to parents who contributed to the cost or they offered free places to parents in need, according to established criteria.
- Authorities differed in the conditions they set for government-funded places taken in private and voluntary sector provision.
- LAs experienced problems arranging staff contracts to allow for extended hours and all year provision.

What is your authority's policy on offering all-day places? How does this fit with the expectations of the Childcare Strategy about meeting the needs of working parents?

LA respondents were asked about the arrangements necessary for provision to offer children a satisfactory all-day experience.

- An appropriate 'educational' curriculum was considered necessary for satisfactory all-day care.
- There was no consensus about the appropriateness of grouping all-day children separately from sessional children.
- There was a consensus that children should not experience 'repeat' sessions.
- One third of respondents made explicit reference to the need for all-day children to have good opportunities for outdoor, physical play.
- Wraparound provision was thought of as care orientated and best offered in a more informal environment.

When considering plans for the future of all-day provision in their authority the respondents indicated that:

- Only three of the twelve authorities surveyed had plans to expand direct LA all-day provision.
- New models of partnership were under consideration in some authorities as a way of expanding provision e.g. joint working with the voluntary and private sectors, supporting childminders offering government-funded provision.
- Concerns about staffing, and staff contracts in particular, were a major constraint on direct LA all-day provision. A lack of suitable accommodation, especially with good space for physical play, limited expansion in some authorities.
- Matching supply and demand in particular locations was sometimes difficult.
- Managing money received for hours purchased was perceived as difficult in some areas.

## 4. Implications For Developing All-Day Provision And Meeting Policy Objectives

### (i) Meeting the needs of working parents

If the needs of working parents are to be met then it is necessary to ensure that provision is available at the time that parents need it (in general, from approximately 8.30 am - 5.30 pm) throughout the year and at a cost that they can afford. Those who find it difficult to purchase such a service would benefit from a more generous supply of single location provision or an extension of Wraparound services and from help with meeting the cost of the service they need. Where there is only sessional provision available in rural communities, childcare partnerships might consider establishing structures of registered childminders. There is a need to extend LA provision beyond the school year pattern if the needs of working parents are to be met.

There was a tension evident in the evidence gathered about LA policy on direct all-day provision. Some authorities saw the all-day provision that they offered as primarily a service for vulnerable families (e.g. those with children 'at risk' or with difficult domestic circumstances) but elsewhere it was a facility to be made available to all families at a reasonable cost. However, the Childcare Strategy calls on partnerships to consider the needs of working parents, irrespective of educational, social or other needs. It may be appropriate for local authorities to adopt a facilitating role that allows them to ensure that all-day provision is available to meet the range of local needs (paying particular attention to the hours that parents want and to the costs that are affordable), though not necessarily through direct LA provision.

### (ii) Developing the infrastructure for pre-school provision

This research suggests that **no one model of provision** or one provider sector (private, voluntary or local authority) offers a more satisfactory all-day experience than others. Some parents preferred group all-day provision while others valued the more individualised experience of care from childminders or nannies. Some parents saw benefits from a change of setting during the day but others favoured a single location. These differences, along with the range of hours sought and the variation in costs that were considered affordable, suggested the **need for diversity** in provision in any one area. Meeting this need, in a sustainable manner (that considers issues of 'best value' across different types of providers), would appear to be within the remit of Childcare Partnerships<sup>1</sup>.

Having different spaces for children to use during the day, especially space for energetic play, was valued by practitioners. Is the accommodation available across your childcare partnership being used most appropriately to offer good all day provision for 3-and 4-year olds?

There are **matters of accommodation and resources** that need to be considered in each sector. Providers should consider whether space to rest can be improved and whether accommodation can be arranged so the need to re-arrange furniture and equipment is reduced and children are offered a number of different spaces during the day (including space for energetic play outside and indoors). Accommodation and resources at every setting may not meet the needs of all-day children. In particular, this may be challenging for LA premises originally designed to offer a different form of service. Childcare Partnerships may wish to consider how the available infrastructure can best be used to meet the needs of all-day children or how new developments can be planned to meet these needs.

<sup>1</sup> Childcare Partnerships are consultative cross-sector bodies set up to guide and plan child care services (including pre-school provision) in their locality.

### (iii) All-day Provision: education or child care?

One striking finding was the pervasive influence of the *Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5* on the way in which providers and practitioners (across sectors and settings) talked about the kind of provision they offered and considered satisfactory. All group care providers saw their provision as offering an educational experience defined, at least in part, by the curriculum areas set out in the *Framework*. It is possible, from the evidence offered here, to sustain an argument that, in group care settings, children were offered provision which was educational or supportive of development and had the incidental benefit, *to parents*, of meeting child care needs. There was no evidence in this study that children in group settings had different experiences during government-funded ‘pre-school education sessions’ or additional time purchased by parents. Similarly, parents did not appear to make any distinction in their expectations between government-funded sessions or additional time purchased to cover working hours.

### (iv) Ensuring a satisfactory experience: attending to quality

Within any one setting ensuring that children’s experience of all-day provision is satisfactory and meets the quality criteria by which all pre-school provision is judged requires appropriate provision of **activities and management of the children’s day**. More consideration should be given to the matter of children’s choices creating their own curriculum. Allowing children to make choices and follow their interests is valued practice but seems to be in some tension with practitioners’ desire to ‘balance’ the curriculum. The evidence also suggests that staff should be sensitive to the development of a peer culture among children in their setting and support this appropriately.

The views gathered in this study suggest that **meeting the needs of all-day children and sessional children** in one playroom is a matter of some concern for practitioners and one which would benefit from further discussion about good practice. The **size of the groups** in which children spend time is a matter for practice development too. Practitioners should observe children’s behaviour and develop ways of meeting children’s needs as they change during the day. **Children’s routines and the pace of the daily programme** requires further planning if quality is to be improved e.g. the periods of ‘down time’ when children are waiting for something to happen have to be minimised, and the time spent on life skills (e.g. preparing for meals, tidying) and group work has to be a quality learning experience and not just a ‘management’ exercise. Practitioners should be encouraged to try to understand, through observation and discussion, why individual children have periods when they are ‘not engaged’.

All practitioners involved in provision for children from a combination of settings thought that more **liaison** would be a ‘good thing’ but virtually none was found to exist. While it is clearly important that practitioners in different settings should be in contact if there are concerns about a child’s development or well-being, it seems less likely that circumstances will allow purposeful exchanges on a regular basis. However, childcare partnerships may wish to find ways to support such liaison.

Liaison with other providers was desired but difficult to organise. Are there ways in which staff in your nursery could share information about children with the other adults involved in their pre-school provision? Can the childcare partnership facilitate liaison?

## (v) Adult:child ratios

In general the requirements for high quality provision mean that there is a need to ensure that the prescribed ratios are maintained throughout the day. It may be necessary in some settings to employ extra staff to do this at certain times of day (for instance when some practitioners are preparing food or moving furniture or attending to arriving or departing sessional children). More particularly, providers and practitioners could examine the daily programme in their own setting alongside the patterns of children's play and their needs for individual adult attention. It might be possible to reflect these patterns in a more flexible approach to staff breaks or non-contact time. From the perspective of the children the quality of their experience will depend not so much on what ratios are set, but on whether staffing in the playroom meets their needs, at any one time, and is appropriate to support their learning and ensure emotional security. Such a perspective requires flexible and responsive practice from sensitive adults.

## (vi) Staff terms and conditions

Aspects of staff conditions must be considered. With increasing demands from parents for all-day, round the year provision and growing expectations that staff will spend time involved in Continuing Professional Development, it will be necessary to develop innovative ideas about ways of staffing extended hours provision.

It was clear from the interviews with local authority representatives and the comments of managers in the LA case study settings that contractual arrangements for staff, particularly about working hours, constrained all-day provision. Meeting the needs of families necessitates pre-school staff working on contracts that allow a working week and year that more nearly match the working patterns of parents. A working week of 40 hours with 6 weeks holiday (taken to coincide with nursery holidays) would, if adopted by most staff in all-day provision, allow a better match with the demands made on the service. There would however, still be a need for shift working where parents need cover beyond the typical 8.30 am – 5.30 pm day and to ensure adequate amounts of non-contact time in some settings.

Changes in staff contracts are necessary if all-day provision is to be expanded and changes in the role of practitioners acknowledged. Are there local or innovative ways of making changes to contracts in your setting?

Changes in contractual arrangements would require changes in the financial rewards offered. Recent developments in the role of the practitioner also suggest that a review of terms and conditions is necessary. Changes in the culture of pre-school environments mean that there has been a shift in the demands on practitioners in all sectors, a 'professionalising' of their role that has, as yet, not been matched in the rewards offered. The expectation that staff will engage in continuing professional development and in activities that had been more typically associated with formal education settings in the past (e.g. assessing and reporting on children, curriculum planning) may require both practitioners and employers to reconsider terms and conditions of service. Such changes have implications for the cost of all-day provision in each sector and, consequently for the fees that parents would be required to meet.

## Reference

Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum (1999) *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Dundee, Scottish Consultative Council on the Curriculum.

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63. *The Impact of Information and Communications Technology Initiatives*

### Further information

If you have views on Interchange and/or wish to find out more about SEED's research programme, contact the SEED Research Unit, The Scottish Executive Education Department, Room 1B Docksides, Victoria Quay, Edinburgh EH6 6QQ



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