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NEIL TURNER



Scarcity value: Tanglewood school has a waiting list of 1,200 children, and nursery pupils have to be registered at birth to get a place

One foot in the door from birth

by Clare Dean

As with Eton and Harrow, places at Jackie Arnot's school are scarce - more than 1,000 children on a 3½-year waiting list. And just as at top public schools, children's names have to be put down at birth to stand a chance of getting in. Some parents have even tried registering earlier.

She has had telephone calls from maternity wards, recommendations from health visitors and is besieged daily by people anxious to find a place for their offspring.

For Mrs Arnot runs one of just two local authority controlled nursery schools in Essex.

The county, once a Tory bastion but now controlled by Labour and the Liberal Democrats, has at last acknowledged that it has a problem with nursery provision.

Currently it comprises the two nursery schools, both in Chelmsford - and 1,000 places in primary and first schools for a potential 36,000 three and four-year-olds.

The county's new administration was elected on a ticket which includes pledges to

make primary schools and under-fives a top priority. While John Major talked about Government commitment to expand nursery education, the county set in train plans to open up rising-five classes in all county primary and first schools. It prepared to put money into budgets to make the proposals work and was looking to redirect up to £21 million into the primary and nursery sector.

Now it fears the plans will be scuppered by the new funding regime for grant-maintained schools, which the Government wants Essex to pilot. The council claims it may have to put the money into secondary schools to combat the rises that grant-maintained schools will receive under the common funding formula for schools (CFF).

Essex, with the highest number of GM schools among the English counties, has told the Government that it will not willingly pilot the CFF and while the row continues, Jackie

Arnot fights her own battle over places.

Her school, Tanglewood, has a waiting list of 1,200 pupils and currently takes in 204 children aged from three to just under five. They are split into four classes with morning and afternoon groups taken by four teachers and four NNEB-trained nursery nurses. Each teacher and nursery nurse deals with some 50 pupils a day, a massive emotional as well as physical drain.

Deputy head Morag Hughes said: "You're working flat out all of the time. You have got to give the afternoon children the fresh, zingy you that the children in the morning had. Our waiting list is the biggest cross that Jackie has to bear. We would love to give every child these opportunities."

Some could afford to put their children into private nursery, but opt for the state school because of what it offers. Ideally, Mrs Arnot would like to see more nursery places in Essex. She says: "I would dearly love to give every child a place - but I just can't."