

CORONAVIRUS (COVID19)



EDUCATION RESTART

PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION GUIDANCE FOR RE-OPENING SETTINGS

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Pre-School Education – Guidance for re-opening settings

Pre-school education provision in Northern Ireland is provided in a mixed model of statutory and non-statutory settings. This guidance should be read in the context of the overarching [Northern Ireland Re-Opening Schools Guidance](#) which has been provided by the Department of Education (DE) to provide a framework for the restart of schools and pre-school education. All references within this guidance to ‘school’ include non-statutory pre-school settings participating in the Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP) unless indicated otherwise.

As with that guidance, this document has been informed by judgements based on the scientific and public health advice available at the time of writing and should be read and applied in conjunction with the latest public health guidance available here. Given the changing scientific and public health environment, this guidance may change in line with the latest advice and as such should be treated as ‘agile’ guidance.

Non-statutory settings should note that they must also comply with any additional guidance provided by the Department of Health (DoH) or Health and Social Care Trusts as a requirement of their registration.

Pre-School Education groups

It is the intention that pre-school children have a safe, play-based learning experience, appropriate for their age and stage of development, in line with the NI Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education.

The Executive on 6 August 2020 agreed that the stringent application of social distancing requirements between pupils will be relaxed from 17 August. Public Health guidance with respect to social distancing of 2m will remain in place between adults and as far as possible between adults and pupils. Schools and pre-school settings should obviously strenuously endeavour to implement as much social distancing as is practical where physical capacity and curriculum delivery permit.

Following consultation with public health colleagues, educational practitioners, trades unions and sectoral bodies it is recommended that:-

- Anyone displaying any COVID -19 symptoms must not attend school with schools and staff vigorously implementing this guidance.

- Pre-school children return to full time education, and implement a ‘protective bubble’ strategy as a key mitigating action. A class will act as a single consistent group or bubble, with minimal prolonged interaction with other classes.
- Pre-school children within a group or bubble will not be expected to socially distance, however distancing within classes should be maximised wherever possible, based on physical capacity and the activities that pupils are engaged in.
- The use of consistent groups or bubbles is not an all-or-nothing approach and will bring public health benefits even if logistics mean that that this measure can be implemented only partially (e.g. with groups maintained for the majority of the day but some limited mixing into wider groups permitted where necessary).
- Remote learning will be supported for those children who are unable to attend e.g. those advised not to attend for medical reasons. Pre-school settings should be ready for the delivery of remote learning in the event of local or wider school closures, or that a class or group of pupils need to self-isolate.
- Where a child is medically advised not to attend school from the commencement of the 2020/21 term, parents should consult with their school Principal and, as required, the Education Authority (EA) regarding education provision for these pupils.

In accordance with relevant legislation and guidance, trades unions have been consulted on and involved in the development of risk assessment templates for use across schools. These have been provided by EA and are available [here](#).

Establishing groups or ‘protective bubbles’

Protective bubbles will be used as a key mitigating action. This involves organising children into small groups (‘protective bubbles’) with consistent membership i.e. same pupils in the bubble each day. Given the changing public health position it is now appropriate that such ‘bubbles’ are based on whole classes, facilitating the safe return of pupils to education on a full time basis.

The size and composition of groups should be determined by individual settings, in the context of DOH and DE guidance and taking into account the setting’s own risk assessments, the overall size of the pre-school class, the physical space available, and the required adult: child ratio. The membership of a group, once established, should remain consistent. In most settings, it should be possible to treat a full pre-school class as a single group.

Keeping children in 'protective bubbles' is a means of decreasing interactions between groups until further easing of measures is possible based on the public health situation. Settings do not need to implement social distancing between the children within a bubble, but should make every effort to minimise physical interaction between different groups, and distancing should be maintained between groups. Adults, including those within groups, should implement social distancing.

The risk of the disease being transmitted is higher the closer the contact, the greater the exposure to respiratory droplets (for example from coughing), or the longer the duration of the contact. A High Risk Contact is a person having had face to face contact with a COVID-19 Case within 2 metres for more than 15 minutes. Passing in corridors and short periods of contact does not therefore present a significant risk to staff or pupils so long as face-to-face conversation is avoided. Extra consideration should be given to interactions between adults which should be minimised in areas such as staff common rooms.

Induction/Settling in

Pre-school settings, in commencing the process of inducting new pupils to the pre-school year, should take into account the Department of Education guidance on Induction and Transition, available [here](#).

Generally, it is expected that the majority of children should be settled in to the pre-school setting within the first few weeks of term, following a short period of induction. Some settings may find it helpful to prioritise certain groups of children during the induction process depending on their particular circumstances and the needs of children enrolled at the setting, but should aim to have all pupils regularly attending the setting as soon as possible and in line with the Department's guidance.

In preparing for induction, settings may wish to provide parents with as much information as possible about what to expect. Photographs or a virtual tour of the setting and an outline of what a typical pre-school session might entail will help parents to prepare pupils ahead of their first day. This is the norm for many settings already, but will be particularly useful given that the opportunity to accommodate parents within the pre-school premises will be limited. Settings may also provide parents with guidance on steps they can take to minimise the need for physical contact or intimate care, including encouraging independence with toileting, wearing clothing (including shoes and coats) that pupils can put on and remove independently, and refraining from bringing unnecessary items to school.

The Department, in partnership with *Safefood*, has launched the latest phase of the Rufus handwashing programme, which aims to help make learning good handwashing habits fun for young children. All pre-school settings will receive a pack at the start of

the academic team which can be used to assist with encouraging good hand hygiene, both at school and at home.

Parents should be actively discouraged from entering the school building as a means of preventing spread of the virus. Instead where it is necessary for parents to visit the pre-school premises, including as part of induction arrangements, settings may wish to plan for visits to take place outdoors. Appropriate hygiene measures should be in place and social distancing between adults maintained.

Patterns of Attendance

As pre-school education settings are not expected to implement social distancing among pupils within groups, in most cases, after a short period of induction, it should be possible for settings to deliver pre-school education for all pupils five days per week.

For settings that operate both morning and afternoon sessions (dual day provision), additional consideration will need to be given to drop off/pick up arrangements, and time required for cleaning and setting up classroom resources between cohorts. Settings are best placed to make decisions based on their specific circumstances, but they may wish to consider options to adjust the format of the pre-school day, including adjusting hours of attendance, or temporarily reducing provision where previously a longer session has been offered.

The pattern of attendance should aim to maximise the attendance of pupils, take into consideration the pattern implemented in local schools and settings, and aim to avoid congestion at drop off and pick up times. Where necessary, it may be permissible for some settings to provide slightly less than the minimum session length in order to accommodate mitigations, such as staggered drop off and pick up of pupils in settings that operate a dual day. Any reduction in session length below the minimum should be implemented only after all other options have been exhausted, and only for as long as is necessary to provide a safe environment for staff and pupils.

Remote Learning

Remote learning will be supported for those children who are unable to attend school, such as those advised not to attend for medical reasons. Whilst a blended approach is a useful and vital contingency arrangement, it is not optimal as it means a reduced face-to-face teaching time and fewer opportunities for play-based learning with peers. Pre-school settings should be ready for the delivery of remote learning in the event of local or wider school closures, or that a class or group of pupils need to self-isolate.

Further guidance on supporting remote learning has been provided by the Department [here](#).