

## Meeting the childcare needs of families throughout COVID19: Information briefing – June 2020

### Background and context

Childcare has been a critical issue throughout the COVID19 pandemic. Many providers closed temporarily as a result of Government guidance that everyone should stay at home to reduce the spread of the virus. However, some group settings and many childminders remained open to provide care for the children of ‘key workers’ and vulnerable children.

Childcare policy is the responsibility of the Department of Education, however the Department of Health has statutory responsibility for the registration and inspection of childcare providers. Throughout the COVID19 pandemic both Departments have worked diligently to address a myriad of childcare related issues. An expert Childcare Reference Group has been convened, membership includes senior Department officials, the Health and Social Care Board, Trusts, membership bodies and other sectoral stakeholders. Meeting on a weekly basis since early May, this group has offered advice and guidance to policy-makers as they seek to ensure childcare is accessible for those who require it.

### Funding for childcare sector

A £12 million funding package (COVID19 Childcare Support Scheme) was announced by the Health and Education Ministers in April. The aim of the fund was to provide financial support to settings that were closed and those that remained open to provide vital services for key workers and vulnerable children. To date there have been fewer applications to the fund than were initially anticipated with a smaller allocation of funds than was projected. However a number of applications are still to be processed for the period April and May, in addition to payments for June, so the amount to be paid from the scheme will increase over the coming weeks.

The current scheme runs until 30 June but the Executive has indicated its intention to support the sector financially to assist with re-opening, recognising its vital role in the economic recovery.

Childcare providers who are currently open or will open before 30 June have until early July to submit their applications for financial support under the current COVID19 Childcare Support Scheme. Application forms have been issued, or will issue, to all relevant settings and there is support available to assist providers if they have any questions about the application process. More information is available [here](#).

Childminders that have remained open and are providing care are also eligible for support through the COVID19 Childcare Support Scheme. Additionally, self-employed childminders may be eligible for support through the Government’s Self-Employed Income Support Scheme, or through Tax Credits or Universal Credit, depending on their circumstances. More information is available [here](#).

### Definition of a key worker

At start of the crisis there was a tight definition of ‘key worker’ for childcare purposes. This definition was more limited than that used in school settings, given the typically smaller space in a childcare setting. As lockdown measures have eased, and economic sectors have begun to reopen, the definition has been gradually extended, first on 8 June to include all those captured by the definition used for education purposes and retail workers, followed by those employed in the construction and manufacturing industries on 16 June.

From 29 June the key worker definition **no longer applies for the purposes of childcare** and all parents who require childcare are eligible to access it.

We recognise that some parents may need to look for alternative formal childcare arrangements if their previous setting remains closed, or they require formal childcare for the first time. Details of all registered provision can be found on the Family Support NI [website](#), or parents can contact support organisations for assistance (details below).

### Assistance in re-opening and infection control

To assist childcare services to re-open, comprehensive guidance has been developed for all childcare providers – both group settings and childminders. The guidance is available on the Family Support NI [website](#). In addition to lots of other useful information, this website also provides links to online training on infection prevention and control

### Childcare Recovery Plan

A Childcare Recovery Plan was announced by the Executive on 18 June, with the aim of restoring the childcare sector to pre-COVID19 capacity as quickly and safely as possible. The plan, along with FAQs, is now available on the Department of Education [website](#). Key measures include:

- Removal of the key worker definition from 29 June.
- No minimum or maximum numbers are required for day care and school age childcare settings to re-open. The maximum number of children should reflect the registration numbers of the facility pre-COVID19 while taking account of Department of Health guidelines on safe practice to minimise transmission of COVID19 - such as 'play pods' limiting interaction across households. With some exceptions, identified in guidance, the Department of Health Minimum Standards for Childminding and Daycare still apply.
- The process for varying registration and for re-opening has been streamlined, and Health and Social Care Trusts aim to process applications for setting re-opening within **72 hours** once all information has been received.
- Increase in the number of families a childminder can look after **at any one time** from 3 to 4 in July, with a further increase to 5 from August. So long as the household number is not exceeded, the number of children that can be cared for remains in line with Department of Health Minimum Standards.
- Indemnification letters in relation to COVID19 incidents have been issued to childcare providers who remained open and will continue to be issued to those providers who have completed the required process between 1 July and 31 August 2020.

### Informal childcare

On 22 June the Executive confirmed that indoor meetings of up to 6 people not from same household can go ahead from Tuesday 23 June, referring to this as a crucial development to alleviate some of the childcare pressures felt by parents by enabling them to access informal childcare.

Informal childcare should be distinguished from 'unregistered' childcare, which is childcare by providers who are not formally registered but who charge a fee for their services. It is illegal to operate as a childcare provider without being registered with the local Health and Social Care Trust.

### Looking ahead

Childcare has rightly been identified as a key priority for the Northern Ireland Executive, with the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister indicating the importance of the sector in facilitating economic recovery and recognising that it needs support going forward to deliver the service parents need at this critical time.

It has been confirmed in the Childcare Recovery Plan that further financial support will be provided for the sector to assist it to re-open. The details of a second childcare funding scheme are now being finalised. Subject to funding decisions, it is understood that scheme details will be made available as soon as possible.

The Childcare Reference Group continues to bring together the key stakeholders from the sector to ensure that any future initiatives are designed and implemented with the needs of parents, employers and childcare providers to the fore.

Moving forward, the Departments of Education and Health will continue to work together on the alignment of guidance. At present, the guidance which has been published in relation to childcare by the Department of Health aims to assist settings which are open now or planning to re-open in the coming weeks. Separate guidance has been published to assist pre-schools to forward plan for September. The Department of Health has committed to keeping published guidance under review and to update it if appropriate in line with medical and scientific advice. A second version of the guidance will be published on 29 June. It is expected that the guidance will be further updated and republished over the summer months.

The Group welcomes your support in sharing information and, where appropriate, details of the work that is taking place across the sector. It is also helpful if you can continue to signpost individuals and organisations to where they can access the most relevant and up to date information.

### **Advice and information**

**Family Support NI:** [www.familysupportni.org](http://www.familysupportni.org) hosts an information hub on childcare during the pandemic, including guidance for settings on reopening and details of financial support available to the sector. The website includes a 'search' function which allows parents to find childcare in their local area. Childcare providers should ensure their details are kept up to date on this portal.

**Employers For Childcare:** Freephone: 0800 028 3008 or email: [hello@employersforchildcare.org](mailto:hello@employersforchildcare.org) Their Family Benefits Advice Service provides advice and guidance on a wide range of childcare and work-related issues to parents, employers and childcare providers. They can carry out personalised 'better off' calculations and advise parents and childcare providers on financial support available.

**Early Years Organisation:** Telephone: 028 90 662825 or email: [support@early-years.org](mailto:support@early-years.org)  
Early Years is the largest organisation in Northern Ireland working with and for young children. We are a non-profit making organisation and have been working since 1965 to promote high quality childcare and early education for children aged 0 - 18 and their families. Currently Early Years provides information and training for parents, providers, employers and local authorities.

**PlayBoard NI:** Telephone: 028 9080 3380 or email: [info@playboard.org](mailto:info@playboard.org)  
PlayBoard NI is the lead organisation for the development and promotion of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland. A membership organisation, PlayBoard offers support, guidance, and advice to School Age Childcare providers.

**NICMA:** Telephone 028 9181 1015/ Email: [info@nicma.org](mailto:info@nicma.org)  
NICMA is a membership organisation and professional body working to support and develop quality home-based childcare and learning for the benefit of children, families & communities. We have and will continue to help and support all childminders throughout this difficult time of this pandemic.

**Parentline NI:** Call FREE on: 0808 8020 400 Chat online or Email: [parentline@ci-ni.org.uk](mailto:parentline@ci-ni.org.uk)  
Parentline NI offers an impartial, non-judgemental listening ear. For advice on something specific or general support and guidance for anyone caring for or concerned about a child or young person. Parentline NI is open 9am to 9pm Monday to Thursday, 9-5pm Friday and 9am to 1pm on Saturday.

**Altram: guth na luathbhlianta lán-Ghaeilge/voice of Irish medium early years** Call 028 9033 2517 or Email: [eolas@altram.org](mailto:eolas@altram.org) Altram is the regional support group for Irish-medium early years projects and was set up to support Irish-medium early years providers, promote high quality early years provision through the medium of Irish and promote the importance of the early years in Irish medium education. Altram works closely with sectoral groups supporting both existing and emerging naíonraí.