



INFORMATION FOR NON-STATUTORY PROVIDERS

This booklet is intended to provide funded voluntary and private (non-statutory) pre-school education providers with information regarding the Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP).

The booklet contains information explaining various aspects of the Programme, including the requirements and standards that all funded non-statutory pre-school education providers must adhere to if they wish to participate in the PSEP.

Department of Education

September 2026

THE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMME

INFORMATION FOR PROVIDERS

CONTENTS

SECTION A GENERAL OVERVIEW

**SECTION B FUNDING AND ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS FOR
NON-STATUTORY PROVIDERS**

SECTION C ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS

SECTION D DEFERRAL OF SCHOOL STARTING AGE

SECTION E PRE-SCHOOL STANDARDISATION PROGRAMME (PSP)

SECTION F STANDARDS

SECTION G INSPECTION OF PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROVISION

**SECTION H THE GETTING READY TO LEARN (GRtL) PROGRAMME AND THE
3+ REVIEW**

SECTION I USEFUL LINKS

ANNEX A RECOMMENDED TIE-BREAKER CRITERIA

SECTION A

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Benefits of pre-school education

1. The Department of Education (DE) seeks to ensure that children get the best start in life through enabling education policies, legislation and funding which provide a range of universal and targeted services to help children achieve, develop and thrive. Early years education provision makes a distinctive contribution to helping achieve the wider aims of improving attainment and reducing underachievement, especially in literacy and numeracy. The services are designed to support children and their families by providing positive early years education and learning experiences in safe, stimulating and supportive environments.¹

The Pre-School Education Programme (PSEP)

2. DE is committed to ensuring that a year of quality funded pre-school education is available to every child in their immediate pre-school year whose family wants it, and the PSEP is how this is achieved.
3. The PSEP is funded by DE via the Education Authority (EA) and is designed as a partnership between the statutory and non-statutory pre-school sectors. Both sectors follow the same curricular guidelines and are subject to the same educational inspection standards. Funded non-statutory pre-school education provision is a significant element of pre-school education, with approximately a third of funded pre-school education places delivered by non-statutory providers.
4. Pre-school provision is considered to be non-sectoral; all pre-school settings, regardless of location or management type are considered to be accessible to children from all backgrounds.
5. The PSEP operates in the policy context of DE's Learning to Learn - a Framework for Early Years Education and Learning, which recognises that a child's success in school and life is significantly influenced at a very young age and before they start school, and highlights the distinctive contribution early years provision has in helping achieve the wider aims of improving attainment and reducing underachievement, especially in literacy and numeracy.

The Pre-School Education Group (PEG)

6. The EA, working with PEG, is responsible for ensuring there is sufficient provision in local areas to provide a funded pre-school education place for every child in their immediate pre-school year whose parents want it. The PEG includes representatives from the statutory, voluntary and private sectors and is chaired by an officer or member of the EA Board.
7. The PEG undertakes an annual review of existing provision, projected need and demand for pre-school education in local areas, taking into account factors such as

¹ Learning to Learn - A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning, DE, 2013

projected live birth statistics, demographic change and changes to existing pre-school education provision.

8. The PEG also considers issues relating to the introduction of new providers to the PSEP based on agreed criteria and minimum standards, the proposed withdrawal of providers from the PSEP and makes recommendations to DE in respect of requests for temporary flexibility from statutory pre-school providers. The PEG also has a role in monitoring Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) reports on an ongoing basis and in line with DE guidance, and where necessary, making appropriate recommendations to the EA and DE on providers' continued participation in the PSEP. The PEG also works closely with the local Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts in this regard.

Structure of provision

9. The PSEP is designed as a partnership between the statutory and non-statutory pre-school sectors. Both sectors follow the same pre-school curricular guidance² and are subject to the same educational inspection standards.
10. Non-statutory providers participating in the PSEP currently provide either part-time or full-time pre-school education places. A part-time place is usually at least 2.5 hours per day, a full-time place is usually 4.5 hours per day, 5 days per week, for 38 weeks over the academic school year September to June.
11. The Minister of Education has set out his intention to expand and standardise the length of pre-school education sessions to a minimum of 22.5 hours per week for all children aged 3-4, including access to free school meals for eligible children, thereby improving equality of provision, in-line with the recommendations of the Fair Start report (2021). Work on this has commenced and is being taken forward by DE and the EA through the Pre-School Standardisation Programme (PSP), with 105 pre-school settings approved to transition to the standardised session length from September 2025.

Further detailed information on the PSP can be found in Section E of this guidance.

12. In the interests of providing continuity of experience for the children, all providers are expected to remain in the PSEP for the full academic year unless exceptional circumstances arise.

Quality

13. Ensuring that providers participating in the PSEP provide high quality pre-school education is a central aim of the PSEP. Non-statutory providers wishing to participate in the PSEP are required to meet specified quality standards and be open to inspection by the ETI.
14. Each provider must be able to demonstrate that they have sufficient, appropriately qualified staff to deliver high quality pre-school education in line with the curricular guidance to the agreed number of children. All funded non-statutory providers are required to adhere to the standards set out in the Minimum Standards for Childminding

² [Link to CCEA Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education](#)

and Day Care for Children under Age 12³, including a minimum staff ratio of 1 adult to 8 children.

³ [Link to DHSS Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children under Age 12](#)

SECTION B

FUNDING AND ADMINISTRATIVE ARRANGEMENTS FOR NON-STATUTORY PROVIDERS

Which pre-school education providers take part in the PSEP?

15. Pre-school education providers which currently provide funded places under the PSEP include statutory grant-aided nursery schools, nursery units or classes in Primary Schools; non-statutory playgroups registered with the HSC Trusts; and non-statutory day nurseries and day care providers registered with the HSC Trusts. A list of providers currently offering funded places is available from the EA.

How does a non-statutory pre-school education setting become a funded provider?

16. Settings wishing to provide funded pre-school education places should contact the EA PEG in the first instance. New entrants will usually only be admitted to the PSEP to address an anticipated shortfall in provision, as it is the PEG practice, where possible, not to displace established good quality pre-school education provision with pre-school education provision in an alternative setting, but every case is considered on its merits.
17. If the EA PEG wishes to consider a provider for inclusion in the PSEP, the provider will be asked to complete an information form which includes a declaration that a range of minimum standards are in place. In order to provide funded places, a provider must be registered with the relevant HSC Trust, have a staff:child ratio of 1:8 and normally have at least 8 children in their immediate pre-school year enrolled in each funded session unless exceptional circumstances apply. Meeting these criteria offers no guarantee that funded places will be offered, and the final decision rests with the EA PEG. There is no formal right of appeal against the decision made by the EA PEG, but the rationale will be made available upon request.

How do the PEG decide if there is a need for new providers in an area?

18. The PEG undertakes an annual review of existing provision, projected need and demand for pre-school education in local areas, taking into account factors such as projected live birth statistics, demographic change and changes to existing pre-school education provision.
19. The PEG will identify areas where an adjustment in the distribution of places is necessary and may consider expressions of interest from providers in those areas where additional provision is required.

How much funding will each pre-school education provider get?

20. Each place provided under the PSEP is funded at a rate set by DE, per funded pupil, per year, which must support a funded pre-school place - normally at least 2.5 hours per day (part-time) or at least 4.5 hours per day (full-time), 5 days per week for 38 weeks of the school year. For the 2025-26 academic year, the funding rates have been set at £2,805 per child (part-time) and £4,316 per child (full-time).
21. The total amount of funding each pre-school education provider receives will depend on the number of pre-school education places that the EA approves for funding, and the number of those places that are filled by target aged children.

How will pre-school education providers receive funding?

22. The EA will notify providers of the arrangements for payment for funded places. Providers are usually paid by the EA on a monthly basis, with claims submitted during the month for payment at the end of the same month.
23. Providers will be required to provide the EA with a standard monthly return and may be required to provide additional information to the EA and/or DE if necessary. Funding is conditional on providers adhering to the requirements set out within this document and the Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12.

How long can a provider remain in the Programme?

24. Currently, no guarantee of funding can be given to any provider for a period of more than one academic year. However, it is the PEG practice, where possible, not to displace established good quality pre-school education provision with pre-school education provision in an alternative setting, but every case is considered on its own merits.

Can funded places be withdrawn from a provider?

25. Funding is available to providers as long as they remain in the PSEP. The EA PEG reviews the allocation of places on an annual basis. Currently, no guarantee of funding can be given to any provider for a period of more than one year.
26. Any setting where the educational provision is evaluated as requiring external support will be given a period of time, in line with ETI procedures, to improve standards. A further inspection, called a progress inspection, will be conducted by the ETI to monitor, evaluate and report on the progress made by the setting. Providers will be advised by DE of the range of additional support available to them to assist in raising standards; the support will be aligned to the areas for action identified through inspection by ETI.
27. If a provider does not make the necessary improvement within a reasonable period, then the funding of pre-school education places by the EA may cease. In addition, in exceptional circumstances (for example if a pre-school education provider's HSC Trust was withdrawn or in the case of serious safeguarding concerns) funding may be withdrawn during a school year.
28. Any provider which does not adhere to the standards as set out in this guidance document, may similarly have funding withdrawn.
29. In order to qualify for funded places a provider must have at least 8 children in their immediate pre-school year enrolled in each session. Settings with less than 8 applications will be reviewed during Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the admissions process by the EA PEG. The EA PEG will make a recommendation to the Department in relation to each group in this position taking into account all available information. The EA PEG will communicate with settings on decisions taken on whether the provider should remain in the PSEP or be withdrawn.

Will all the pre-school education provider's places be funded?

- 30. The number of places allocated to individual providers is based on the assessed level of demand/need in the area. Some pre-school education providers will therefore have all their places funded and others only a proportion of their places funded.
- 31. The number of places allocated may vary from year to year. In order to be considered for funded places a provider must normally have at least 8 children in their immediate pre-school year enrolled in each session unless exceptional circumstances apply. Enrolment of this number of children offers no guarantee of continued participation in the PSEP.
- 32. The EA has recently carried out a review of their PAN allocation processes to identify potential areas for improvement. A copy of the EA's report which contains a number of recommended short-term; medium-term; and long-term actions to bring about improvement is available [here](#).

Non-Enrolment of a Child

- 33. Enrolment is defined as having occurred when the pre-school setting has accepted an application for admission and the child in question has attended the setting for at least one day on or before the school census date. When an application has been made to a pre-school setting and the child has been accepted but does not attend at the start of the academic year this is considered as non-enrolment.
- 34. The parents of any child who does not present at the start of term should be contacted, in writing if possible, to seek confirmation of a start date for the child or a reason why they are unable to attend. This correspondence should explain that a place cannot be reserved indefinitely and that the child's place will be allocated to another child if no response is received. It is suggested that a two-week deadline for response be provided. If no response has been received within the two weeks, further correspondence should issue, which should also indicate that if no response is received within two weeks, the child's offer of a place will be rescinded. If, following the conclusion of this further two-week period, there has been no response from the parents, the child's offer of a place may be revoked and the place offered to the next child on the pre-school's waiting list.

Will funding be affected if a child does not attend the pre-school, or if a new child enrolls?

- 35. PSEP funding is linked to actual attendance of eligible pupils. If the enrolment of the setting changes, the setting is required to advise the EA immediately so that funding arrangements can be updated. If a child is temporarily unable to attend due to medical reasons etc., this should be reflected in the attendance register. Most absences (eg. due to a short illness) do not affect funding. The EA will support and advise the setting on individual cases of longer-term absences or non-enrolments.

What documentation is required for funding purposes?

36. The EA will issue details of the specific arrangements for providers to claim their funding. It will be essential for documentary evidence such as application forms, attendance registers and birth certificates to be kept readily available for auditing purposes.

Can a provider charge parents for a PSEP place?

37. No. The PSEP place is funded by the EA and providers may not charge for it.

38. If a provider wishes to request voluntary contributions from parents, they may do so, provided that it is made explicit that all contributions are entirely voluntary, and that any parent's decision not to contribute will in no way affect their child's participation in the funded session.

39. If a provider wishes to charge for additional, optional services, they may do so provided that it is made explicit that the services are additional to the funded session, and that any parent's decision not to avail of any additional service will in no way affect their child's participation in the funded session.

Can a provider engage external commercial services during a funded session?

40. It is for individual providers to decide whether or not to use external services provided on a commercial basis. However, where such services are used as part of the session funded under the PSEP, they must be consistent with the pre-school curricular guidance and be of a satisfactory standard. It is not appropriate for an additional charge to be made to the parents of children in receipt of funded places for these services.

Can a provider charge for other services, provided outside the PSEP funded session?

41. Yes. Providers may provide other services such as childcare sessions which are separate and additional to the funded PSEP session. Parents wishing to access these additional services should be advised that they are separate to the PSEP provision and that participation in the funded PSEP provision is not dependent on their uptake of any additional services offered.

42. It is important to note that PSEP funding provided by the EA is to cover the costs of the PSEP service from the setting and should not be relied on to fund other services/activities the setting may provide.

What information does DE require?

43. Statistical information is required by DE in relation to children taking up places under the PSEP. This will be collected in October each year during the annual School Census. It is important that this information is completed and returned to DE by the required date.

44. Information requested as part of the School Census may include:

- number of children in the pre-school education provision;

- numbers of children in funded places attending each morning and afternoon;
- number of children in funded places whose parents receive Income Support; or Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance; or Income related Employment and Support Allowance; or Universal Credit;
- number of children entitled to free school meals;
- religion of children in funded places (i.e. total numbers of children from various denominations, **not** details of the religion of individual children); and
- number of children with additional needs, or with a statement of special educational needs.

45. It is a requirement of participation in the PSEP that settings provide this information when requested and in the format requested. In addition, the ETI may request information to help inform inspection activities.

What is Extended Services Funding?

46. Extended Services Funding is available to eligible⁴ pre-school education settings. The funding is targeted at eligible settings to help them identify and address underdeveloped social, emotional, communication and language skills of the children in the pre-school setting. DE will contact eligible settings at the beginning of each academic year.

What arrangements should be put in place in the event of exceptional/ unexpected closure?

47. In the event that a setting is forced to closed for a period of time due to unforeseen circumstances the Leader or Deputy Leader should make immediate contact with the EA PSEP team in the first instance to notify them of the closure. EA PSEP can be contacted by telephone on 028 9031 7644 or email EAPSEP@eani.org.uk. The EA PSEP team will advise the Leader or Deputy Leader on next steps for their particular circumstances.

⁴ Eligibility criteria is as follows: 51% or more of pre-school children (in funded places) drawn from a Neighbourhood Renewal Area or the 30% most disadvantaged Super Output Areas using the NISRA Multiple Deprivation Measure; and / or 37% or more of pre-school children (in funded places) who would have a Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME).

SECTION C

ADMISSION ARRANGEMENTS

Which children are eligible for funded places?

48. All children admitted to funded places must be in their final pre-school year, (information on deferral can be found in Section D below). Priority must be given to children from socially disadvantaged circumstances as defined by DE.

What happens if a pre-school education provider is oversubscribed?

49. If a pre-school education provider receives more applications than there are funded places available, the published admissions criteria must be applied. The criteria must give priority to children from socially disadvantaged circumstances and must be capable of distinguishing between applicants down to the last available place. Advice on the use of admissions criteria is provided to all funded pre-school education providers and is available on the DE website. via the following link: [Circular 2024 17 - Open Enrolment in Nursery Schools and Nursery Classes in Primary Schools](#)

50. It is important for settings to note that as published admissions criteria is what parents base their decision to apply for a pre-school place on, this cannot be changed at a later stage without the agreement of the EA and DE.

51. In terms of distinguishing between children down to the last available place, this means that it is obligatory for a pre-school's admissions criteria to include a tie-breaker. DE recommendations for tie-breaker criteria are attached as at **Annex A**.

52. Admissions criteria are intended to enable management committees to make objective decisions about which children to admit to the setting. It is essential that the admissions criteria should be:

- objective;
- capable of verification; and
- capable of distinguishing between children down to the last available place.

What should be considered when setting criteria?

53. Voluntary and private settings must develop criteria to cater for oversubscription. Responsibility for drawing up these criteria rests with management committees. The Department expects that the criteria drawn up by management committees, which will enable them to select children for admission when oversubscribed with applications, will take into account a range of factors. These could include:

- the geographical location of the child's home relative to the setting;
- children looked after (CLA), defined by the Children NI Order 1995 as children who are in the care of a Trust or who are provided with accommodation by the Trust; and
- in the case of pre-school education provision in primary schools, whether brother/sister (half-brother/sister) is attending the primary school.

54. Priority must be given to children resident in Northern Ireland at the time of proposed admission.
55. Management committees should carefully consider the content of their criteria and where guidance is not being followed the reasons for this should be clearly recorded (e.g. in the relevant minutes). If a provider fails to follow guidance and does not have sufficient reason for doing so, they may not be indemnified by the EA if legal proceedings are initiated against them.
56. Management committees must ensure that their published criteria are clear as to how the criteria and any sub-criteria will be applied in the event of oversubscription. The point at which a tie-breaker will be applied (i.e. at the last criterion that can be applied or the last sub-criterion that can be applied) must be made clear.
57. Management committees must ensure that their admissions criteria are available in sufficient time for the EA to include them in the published information. The EA will communicate with pre-school settings on this.

Are there any criteria which the Department recommend AGAINST using?

58. The Department would strongly recommend that pre-school settings should not use criteria which:
- differentiate by age (for children in their final pre-school year) (except where used as a tie breaker for the last available place);
 - differentiate by order of parental preference. Pre-school settings should not use a criterion which gives priority on the basis that a family has identified it as a first preference. Use of these so called 'first preference' criteria can limit the proper operation of parental preference;
 - prioritise children of employees/management committee members;
 - include familial connection beyond sibling(s) currently attending the setting (in the case of pre-school education provision in a primary school this can mean the primary school); or
 - prioritise based on intent to enrol a child in a particular primary school.

How is "social disadvantage" defined?

59. Children from "socially disadvantaged circumstances" are those whose parents have an entitlement to:

Income Support; or
Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance.

How can a pre-school education provider tell whether children should be given priority on the basis of social disadvantage?

60. When parents indicate that their child is eligible for priority on grounds of social disadvantage, they must provide evidence that they have an entitlement to a qualifying benefit. When parents apply for places for their child on this basis, they must provide benefit verification to confirm they have an entitlement to a qualifying benefit as defined under the socially disadvantaged circumstances criterion.

61. Further guidance on the socially disadvantaged circumstances criterion is available on the [EA website](#).

62. Children whose parents have an entitlement to other benefits not listed in the definition of “socially disadvantaged circumstances” must not be prioritised under that criterion.

Are parents required to provide any other documents?

63. A pre-school education provider will require sight of the original birth certificate of every child whose parents apply for a funded place, in order to ensure that only eligible children are admitted to funded places. In most cases, parents will upload an image of this via the EA Connect School Applications portal. *An image of the birth certificate should be retained for audit purposes.*

64. In addition, DE has published guidance on the “duty to verify” important information contained within applications for admission. It may therefore be necessary to ask parents for additional documents to verify address and other details. DE issues guidance on admissions and the duty to verify which can be found on the [DE website](#).

Is there an admissions timetable?

65. The admissions timetable will be updated and issued as a separate circular on an annual basis. Settings must consider all applications for admission in accordance with the timetable as published by DE and strictly adhere to the published dates at each stage.

66. It is imperative that settings which are oversubscribed ensure that the applications for pupils who have not been accepted are made available promptly to the EA through the EA Connect School Applications portal. Where a setting is not able to select an application, once not selected on the portal, the application will move to the next preference if one is listed. Failure to make timely decisions on applications may result in a child being unable to secure a funded pre-school place.

67. The applications of those children not accepted for admission whose parent stated only one preference or who have no further preferences should also be made available promptly to the EA. Settings are not permitted to hold on to applications in the expectation that additional funded places will be allocated to the setting at a later date.

How should providers manage any waiting list they may have?

68. It is essential that all settings are clear and transparent regarding the operation of their waiting list policy. The Department does not instruct settings on how waiting lists should be managed, as this is entirely a matter for the management committee of each setting. It is essential, however, that all voluntary and private settings participating in the PSEP publicise their waiting list policy, whatever it may be. Even where no waiting list is maintained by the setting, this information should be publicly available. Further information on waiting lists can be found in the DE [Circular 2012/10 - Guidance for Schools on the Operation of Admissions Waiting Lists](#).

Can a child have a funded place at more than one pre-school education provider?

69. No. Parents accepting an offer of a funded place should be required to sign a declaration that their child will not be attending any other EA funded pre-school education provision.

What happens if a pre-school education provider has funded places unfilled?

70. If a pre-school education provider is unable to fill its full allocation of funded places, the EA must be notified as soon as possible.

What happens if a child leaves during the year?

71. Should a child who has been allocated a funded place leave, then the setting must advise the EA who will advise on the next steps. Providers may be able to reallocate the place to another target aged child, or in some cases may be able to offer the place to a fee-paying child.

What if a child applies during the year?

72. If a provider has a funded place available, then it should be allocated in line with the published admissions criteria. If the provider does not have a place available, it should contact the EA Admissions office for advice.

SECTION D

DEFERRAL OF SCHOOL STARTING AGE

What does 'deferral of school starting' age mean?

73. **The School Age Act (NI) 2022** became law on 28 April 2022. This legislation allows flexibility for parents of "young for year" children to defer their child starting primary school (and also in turn, pre-school) by 12 months.

Who is eligible for deferral?

74. The right to defer applies to children born between 1 April-1 July (inclusive), and also to children who were due to be born on or between those dates but were born earlier. The option to defer is entirely a matter of parental choice and is in no way mandatory. The majority of parents of eligible children do not choose deferral for their child.

75. All children, regardless of whether their parents choose deferral for them or not, will continue to be eligible to attend one year of funded pre-school education and will receive 12 years of compulsory education.

How do parents/guardians apply for deferral?

76. The EA will provide guidance to parents/guardians considering deferral for their child, including how to make a deferral request. Further information can also be accessed via the following links:

[Deferral of School Starting Age | Education Authority Northern Ireland \(eani.org.uk\)](https://www.eani.org.uk/services/eatv/parent-videos/ea-connect-admissions-deferral-of-school-starting-age)

<https://www.eani.org.uk/services/eatv/parent-videos/ea-connect-admissions-deferral-of-school-starting-age>

When should a parent request deferral?

77. Within the guidance, parents are strongly advised that if they wish to request deferral for their child, they do so prior to their child's target pre-school year. This ensures continuity for their child. Deferral during or after their child's target pre-school year is known as **late deferral**:

Deferral:

If a child:

- was born on or between 1 April - 1 July (inclusive), or was due to be born on or between those dates but was born earlier; and,
- has not attended or is not currently attending a funded pre-school setting under PSEP as a target aged (not penultimate aged) child; and,
- where that child's parent has completed a request to defer their child starting P1; then,

a submitted pre-school application for that child will be prioritised within the published admissions timetable dates as a “target age” or “final pre-school year” child.

Late deferral:

If a child:

- was born on or between 1 April - 1 July (inclusive), or was due to be born on or between those dates but was born earlier; and,
- has attended or is currently attending a funded pre-school setting under PSEP as a target aged (not penultimate aged) child; and,
- where that child's parent has completed a request to defer their child starting P1; then,

a submitted pre-school application for that child will **not** be prioritised within the published admissions timetable dates as a “target age” or “final pre-school year” child.

This is because the child will have already been prioritised within the pre-school admissions process, so cannot be prioritised for a second time. A parent can apply for a further year of funded pre-school education for them, but this is not guaranteed and risks a gap in education provision for the child.

Where a child's parents apply for **late deferral**, there is no automatic entitlement to a second year's funded pre-school education. Parents will be required to make a new application if they want to apply for a further year's funded pre-school education. Their application will not be prioritised as a final pre-school year application for a second time, and it will be considered at Stage 2 of the admissions process in line with the published timetable.

SECTION E

Pre-School Standardisation Programme (PSP)

78. In May 2024 the Minister of Education set out his intention to expand and standardise the length of pre-school education sessions to a minimum of 22.5 hours per week for all children aged 3-4, including access to free school meals for eligible children, thereby improving equality of provision, in-line with the recommendations of the Fair Start report (2021).

The Department, in conjunction with the EA, is progressing a Pre-School Standardisation Programme (PSP) to effect this change over time.

79. In the first year of the PSP, the Minister approved 105 pre-school settings to transition to offer at least 22.5 hours per week from September 2025. These include 60 non-statutory and 46 statutory settings, covers every constituency in Northern Ireland and will provide over 2,500 additional full time pre-school places.

80. Simultaneously to supporting the first 105 settings to transition, the PSP is turning attention to the work of identifying and supporting the next cohort of settings to transition to the standardised session length.

81. The EA carried out a further state of readiness survey in Spring 2025. This refreshed data will enable the EA to identify settings suitable to be considered for transition from September 2026.

82. Subject to budget and analysis of the updated state of readiness data, it is the intention to approve approximately 100 more settings, or 2,200 places, to transition to the longer session length from September 2026.

83. It will take a number of years for all pre-schools to transition to the standardised length. The full roll-out of the programme will largely be dependent on approvals and resources from the NI Executive at each stage, as well as the circumstances of individual pre-school settings.

84. For further information and updates regarding the PSP please visit the Department's website at the link below:

[Pre-School Standardisation Programme](#)

SECTION F

STANDARDS

85. A pre-school education provider must meet quality standards if it is to receive funding from the EA for a pre-school education place.

86. These standards are intended:

- to reassure parents and others about the quality of provision which has been made for their child;
- to ensure that the broad and balanced educational experiences are appropriate for children in the year before they begin compulsory schooling; and
- to establish a sound foundation on which to build quality pre-school education before the children start compulsory primary school.

Curriculum

87. The term 'curriculum' is used to describe the planned educational experiences which are appropriate for children in the year prior to starting compulsory education. All pre-school education providers in receipt of funded places are expected to offer a curriculum which follows the Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education, published by the Northern Ireland Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).. This can be accessed [here](#).

88. The curricular guidance for pre-school education outlines the range of learning opportunities which children of this age and stage of development should have through play and other relevant experiences. It should be used by staff to plan, review and develop the best practice in early learning and development across the six areas of learning and to promote good practice in a well-balanced play-based curriculum.

89. This curricular guidance is used by ETI when evaluating the quality of provision and the outcomes for learners in all pre-school providers.

Group size and composition

90. The curriculum for pre-school children must promote their personal, social, physical, intellectual and emotional development, and this can be done most effectively if children learn and play as part of a group of reasonable size. Therefore, in all pre-school education providers, there must be at least 8 children in their final pre-school year in each group (although not all of these children need to be in funded places).

91. The focus of the educational provision in the pre-school education provider must be wholly on the needs of children in their final pre-school year.

Session length and frequency

92. All pre-school education sessions must last at least 2.5 hours for part-time provision and at least 4.5 hours for full-time provision, and normally be offered on a 5 session

per week basis (Monday-Friday). All pre-school education providers must offer at least 38 weeks of sessions during the period September to June in any academic year.

Staff training

93. Providers participating in the PSEP are required to be in operation for 190 days each year. Wherever possible, pre-school education providers should arrange for staff training to take place outside their normal opening hours. However, it is recognised that this will not always be possible, and pre-school education providers may therefore close for a maximum of 5 days during each academic year to facilitate staff training and development. As much notice as possible must be given to parents of any changes to the pre-school education provider's opening hours.
94. Where a provider decides not to use all 5 available days, it must be open as normal to provide pre-school education sessions. The EA will request providers to provide evidence of the training undertaken during closure days. Providers are expected to take into account any training needs highlighted by the ETI during the inspection process when planning their training schedule.

Staffing

95. Non-statutory providers participating in the PSEP are required to adhere to the requirements set out in the [Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Under 12](#) which provides guidance on issues such as staffing ratios and qualifications. These minimum standards apply to the registration process with a HSC Trust, which is a precursor to participation in the PSEP.
96. In all non-statutory pre-school education providers in receipt of funded places an adult:child ratio of 1:8 must apply.
97. Settings should note that decisions on staff pay and conditions are a matter for the employing authority, not DE or the EA.

Support from a qualified teacher/early years specialist

98. It is a requirement of the programme that all pre-school education providers in receipt of funded places have the services of a suitably experienced and qualified teacher or early years specialist during the entire period for which they receive funding from the EA.
99. This support can be provided by an appropriately qualified member of staff, or from an external provider. Pre-school education providers must meet the costs of the early years specialist (EYS) support from within the funding provided to them by the EA under the PSEP.

Accommodation

100. All pre-school education provision, including any relevant outdoor areas, must conform to the standards required through registration with the relevant HSC Trust. Information about registration requirements and requirements regarding accommodation and the physical environment are set out in the DoH Minimum Standards guidance which can be found [here](#).

101. Furniture and equipment must comply with the relevant health and safety regulations and be appropriate to the age group and sufficient to support the implementation of the pre-school curriculum.

Information for parents and others

102. Information must be made available to parents and others to help them decide if they wish to apply for a funded pre-school education place. This should include:

- information on the pre-school curriculum;
- dates and hours of opening;
- staffing numbers and qualifications;
- admissions policy;
- Special Educational Needs policy and provision; and
- details of any fees and charges which may apply to services which parents may avail of on a voluntary basis.

103. Information must also be made available to parents of children attending the provider. This must include:

- health and safety arrangements;
- settling-in policy and procedures;
- behaviour management policy;
- safeguarding and child protection policy;
- complaints procedure; and
- reports on children's progress at regular intervals.

Future requirements

104. All pre-school education providers are expected to comply with any regulations made by DE in respect of pre-school education and to take account of any guidance which may be issued from time to time which relates to children of pre-school age. Failure to adhere to such requirements may impact on funding and/or the providers continued participation in the PSEP.

SECTION F

INSPECTION OF PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATIONAL PROVISION

105. All pre-school education providers receiving funding under the PSEP have their provision inspected and monitored regularly by the ETI.
106. All pre-school education providers in receipt of funded places are provided with guidance on the current inspection procedures. The [Empowering Improvement Framework](#) published in May 2024 sets out the new model of inspection and is available on the [ETI website](#).

Why are inspections carried out?

107. The purpose of all inspection activity is to build capacity within the settings inspected to provide high quality education and outcomes for the children. This will be achieved by: promoting processes of self-evaluation which will endure beyond the period of the inspection; evaluating and reporting objectively and fairly on the quality of provision in the best interests of the children; helping to inform and establish improved ways of working through professional dialogue; and identifying, affirming, reporting, and disseminating examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn.
108. DE's 'Every School A Good School' policy sets out clearly the expectations of DE in relation to all schools striving for improvement.
109. During an inspection the ETI will work alongside the pre-school education provider to consider how well the setting:
- has identified and articulates its vision;
 - prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
 - overcomes the main challenges it faces;
 - monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
 - grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

Who inspects?

110. An inspection team has members of the ETI who have qualifications and a range of experience in the field of early years education. The team is led by a Reporting Inspector (RI) who is in charge of the inspection and is responsible for the reporting of the findings. In some inspections an Associate Assessor (AA) may accompany the RI during an inspection.

What happens during an inspection?

111. During inspections, the inspectors will:
- observe the children during their play and other activities;
 - talk to the children about what they are doing;

- observe the work of the staff; and
- talk to the principal/leader and the staff about the provider's programme.

112. The Empowering Improvement Framework comprises five core questions and nine contributory areas.

113. The inspection process will focus specifically on the five core questions of the Empowering Improvement Framework within the individual context of the early years setting. The five core questions are:

- What is the school's/organisation's vision and what informs it?
- How is the school/organisation setting about achieving the vision, within its own context?
- How does the school/organisation monitor how well it and its learners are doing and how responsive is it to overcoming challenges and barriers?
- How does the school/organisation define, celebrate and embed success for all learners?
- How is the school/organisation creating the right conditions for the growth and development of a community of learning?

114. It is expected that evidence will be drawn, during the inspection, from the four central contributory areas:

- Curriculum for All;
- Planning, Teaching and Assessment for Successful Learning;
- Health, Wellbeing and Keeping Safe; and
- Equity, Equality and Inclusion.

This will be supplemented, to varying degrees, by evidence from the other five contributory areas depending on the setting's current priorities.

115. The nine contributory areas are:

- Curriculum for All
- Planning, Teaching and Assessment for Successful Learning
- Health, Wellbeing and Keeping Safe
- Equity, Equality and Inclusion
- Environment, Society and Economy
- Digital Skills
- Staff Professional Learning
- Collaborative Networks
- Learner Participation

116. The inspectors' evaluations will be based mainly on the first-hand evidence they gain from:

- (i) observing the staff in their work and the children at play and other activities;
- (ii) reading and evaluating the relevant documentation; and
- (iii) from talking to the staff.

In addition, account will be taken of the responses from the parent, and staff questionnaires. During inspection, the governors/management committee, the early years specialist (if applicable) and the staff meet with the ETI to share information about the governance processes.

How can members of the management committee/proprietor contribute to the inspection process?

117. In addition to meeting at the time of inspection, members of the management committee/proprietor can give their views on how well the pre-school education provider is performing by:

- Requesting to speak to the RI or team member during the inspection; and/or
- Contacting the RI through a telephone call or letter to Inspection Services Team using the address, phone number or e-mail address below.

What happens after an inspection?

118. The RI will report orally the findings of the inspection after the inspection is completed. It should be noted that the findings reported back are provisional at this stage as all inspection outcomes are subject to an ETI quality assurance process.

119. The findings will also be recorded in a written report, copies of which are sent by email to the person in charge. If the management group or proprietor wishes to comment on any aspect of the inspection or the report, or to receive any further information about the inspection process, the chairperson or proprietor should write to the Chief Inspector at the address below.

What if a provider does not meet the required standards?

120. Any setting where the educational provision is evaluated as requiring external support will be given a period of time, in line with ETI procedures, to improve standards. A further inspection, called a progress inspection, will be conducted by the ETI to monitor, evaluate and report on the progress made by the setting. Providers will be advised by DE of the range of additional support available to them to assist in raising standards; the support will be aligned to the areas for action identified through inspection by ETI.

121. If a provider does not make the necessary improvement within a reasonable period, then the funding of pre-school education places by the EA may cease.

Safeguarding/Child Protection

122. If the arrangements for safeguarding/child protection do not align sufficiently to the current DE statutory guidance during an inspection or district visit, the ETI will return to the pre-school setting within six working weeks to evaluate and report on the progress in addressing the identified areas for action.

Does ETI inspection replace HSC Trust inspection?

123. No. All pre-school education providers registered with HSC Trusts will continue to have annual inspections as required by the Children (NI) Order 1995.

Inspection Services Team
Room F29, New Building
Rathgael House
Balloo Road
BANGOR, Co Down
BT19 7PR
Tel: 028 9127 9726
Email: eti@education-ni.gov.uk

SECTION G

The Getting Ready to Learn (GRtL) Programme

124. The GRtL Programme is open to all pre-school education settings with DE-funded places. GRtL provides support to pre-school settings to help them engage with parents, to improve and sustain positive home learning environments for their children. There have been positive outcomes reported for the children, families and settings who have participated; and DE would encourage all settings to participate. Further information can be found at the GRtL website which can be accessed at: [Getting Ready to Learn](#)

The 3+ Review

125. The 3+ Review is a developmental review of children in their pre-school year; it is currently offered to 100% of pre-schools and is carried out by Health Visitors in partnership with pre-school practitioners and parents. The 3+ Review takes place in the pre-school setting and links with the pre-school curricular guidance, providing parents and practitioners with valuable information that can be used to support the child's development. The Review also enables early identification of needs and where necessary appropriate referral to support services.
126. Named health visitors or a member of the health visiting team will contact you to agree arrangements for the 3+ Review in your setting. The overall process and key stages are explained in the guidance for pre-schools which can be accessed via the following link: [3+ Review - Guidance for Pre-School Settings](#). DE would encourage settings to become involved in this important partnership between education and health.

SECTION H

Useful Links

Admissions

Education Authority Admissions Site

[Link to EA Admissions webpage](#)

Admissions Guidance

[Link to DE School Admissions Guidance](#)

Deferral of School Starting Age

[Link to DE School Starting Age Guidance](#)

Curriculum

Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education

[Link to CCEA Curricular Guidance for Pre-School Education](#)

Inspection Procedures

[Link to ETI Update on Inspection Process During Recovery Period](#)

[Link to ETI Guidance what Happens After Inspection](#)

Minimum Standards

Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Under Age 12 –

[Link to DHSS Minimum Standards for Childminding and Day Care for Children Age Under 12](#)

Other Guidance and Policies

‘Every School A Good School’ policy

[Link to DE Guidance on Every School a Good School](#)

Child Protection and Safeguarding

[Link to DE Guidance on Child Protection and Safeguarding](#)

Getting Ready to Learn

[Link to Getting Ready to Learn \(GRtL\)](#)

The Role of the Early Years Specialist

[Link to DE Guidance on Early Years Specialists Role](#)

Induction and Transition Guidance

[Link to DE Guidance Induction and Transition Pre-School Education and Year 1 Primary School](#)

Special Educational Needs

[Link to DE Guidance on Special Educational Needs](#)

ANNEX A

RECOMMENDED TIE-BREAKER CRITERIA

The Department's recommendation on tie-breakers is focused on the following methods of tie-breaker:

- **Method A - Alphabet:** A criterion that prioritises applicants by where the letters of their name (as entered on a Birth Certificate) places them on a rank established by any order of all of the letters within the alphabet. A typical description of this well-established tie-breaker by a school (within published admission criteria) is:
 - "Children will be selected for admission on the basis of initial letter(s) of surname (as entered on Birth Certificate) in the order set out below:
E M Y K T S L Mac Z Q O G N A Mc I H F V P R W D B C U J X
 - This order was determined by random selection.
 - In the event of surnames beginning with the same initial letter the subsequent letters of the surname will be used in alphabetical order. In the event of two identical surnames the alphabetical order of the initials of the forenames will be used."
- **Method B - Random Selection:** capable of leaving a clear audit trail (e.g. computerised random selection).

Method A does not present the operational difficulties for the processing of preferences that are presented by Method B. The only weakness with Method A is that it will not distinguish between children with exactly the same full name. However, if a school's admission criteria permit the school to apply the "random selection tie-breaker" in the event of a tie within the "alphabet tie-breaker", or *vice versa* then this will nearly always be effective.

The optimal entry for a tie-breaker criterion for a management committee to consider is, therefore, either of:

- Method A, then Method B;
- Method B, then Method A.

The Department recommends that schools using computerised random selection produce a new randomised list for each academic year.