

NORTHERN IRELAND CHILDCARE RECOVERY PLAN

APRIL 2020 – AUGUST 2020

PART 1

SUPPORTING PARENTS AND SUSTAINING THE CHILDCARE SECTOR AT THE HEIGHT OF THE PANDEMIC

Under this Part of the plan, arrangements were put in place to ensure that childcare was available for children of working parents and vulnerable children by supporting the parts of the sector which remained open. Support was also provided to childcare settings which were forced to close with the express intention of making recovery possible.

Action	Description
The COVID-19 Childcare Sector Support Scheme	Between April and June 2020, a £12m funding scheme with 4 financial support components to meet the childcare needs of keyworkers in health and social care and other public sector front-line roles. This included support for open settings and childminders and the introduction of a bespoke Approved Home Childcare Scheme. In addition, the fund supported the parts of the daycare and school-age childcare sector which closed with the express intention of making recovery possible.
Supporting Guidance	From 7 May 2020, guidance for the open parts of the sector to enable it to safely care for children and keep staff safe at the most critical part of the pandemic. This guidance has been kept up to date throughout and in line with developments in public health advice.
Support for providers	From 7 May 2020, support for providers through support agreements with a number of key sectoral organisations, including the Northern Ireland Childminding Association; the Early Years Organisation, Playboard and Employers for Childcare.
Support for parents	From 7 May 2020, Support for parents through the Parentline Helpline and published advice and information.

Indemnification	Between April and June 2020, the provision of indemnification for COVID-19-related incidents by the Department of Health to those parts of the sector which continued to provide services.
Extension of keyworker definition	From 8 June 2020, the extension of the definition of keyworker to enable more parents in work or returning to work to access childcare and corresponding relaxation of restrictions on operating arrangements without compromising the safety of children or staff. Guidance reflects the relaxation of restrictions imposed during the height of the pandemic and Play Pods are introduced in Daycare and School-age childcare settings as a means of safely organising provision by keeping children and staff together in small groups (Pods) and keeping groups (Pods) apart. From 16 June 2020, the manufacturing and construction services were added to the keyworker definition.
PART 2	
RETURNING THE SECTOR TO FULL CAPACITY	
<i>Under this Part of the plan, the aim is to assist the sector to return to full capacity by enabling more providers to re-open and more parents to access registered and informal childcare.</i>	
Action	Description
Breaking the link with the definition of keyworker	From 29 June 2020, the definition of keyworker will no longer apply for childcare purposes. From this date, the aim is to enable the childcare sector to keep pace with decisions by the Executive to re-open the economy and ensure that working parents have sufficient time to organise childcare in advance of having to or being able to return to work. It is also intended that childcare will also be available to parents who continue to work from home to enable them to better manage work and family obligations.
Making re-opening easier	From 15 June 2020, the process of varying registration as a childcare provider will be streamlined. Providers of childcare who are currently not open will be advised to make <i>preparations</i> to re-open from by completing a Proposal to Re-open Form (which they will receive individually) and

	<p>submitting it to their local Health and Social Care Trust Early Years Team at least one week before they plan to re-open. Health and Social Care Trust Early Years Team will consider and respond to proposals to re-open within a maximum of 3 days. On receipt of confirmation from the local Trust, a provider will be in a position to immediately provide childcare.</p>
<p>Relaxation of restrictions on daycare and school-age childcare settings</p>	<p>From 15 June 2020, there are will be no operating restrictions in terms of minimum or maximum numbers of children daycare and school-age childcare settings can provide childcare to, although guidance issued by the Department of Health on 9 June 2020 will continue to apply. The continued application of the guidance will be kept under review. The use of Play Pods will continue to be required, which is a means of keeping children and designated members of staff together in small groups. Pods should not mix with each other within a single setting. By organising provision in this way, it is not intended to restrict capacity but, rather, to support and promote safe practice for the purpose of minimising the transmission of the COVID-19 virus. The use of outdoor space is being recommended as much as possible. Department of Health Minimum Standards will also continue to apply, particularly in relation to staff ratios and space requirements, although mixing of age groups is permitted and the requirement to have a separate room for children under 2 will continue to be suspended until further notice. Subject to medical and scientific advice, it is expected that daycare and school-age childcare settings will be working to full capacity from September 2020. This will be subject to parental demand for their services.</p>
<p>Relaxation of restrictions on childminders</p>	<p>From 29 June 2020, childminders will be able to provide childcare to 4 families in their homes at one time. This could mean that childminders provide childcare to more than 4 families on any day or within any week in July. This will depend on patterns of care provided; many parents require part-time, rather than full-time childcare. Childminders will be required to comply with guidance issued by the Department of Health on 9 June 2020. The guidance is intended to support and promote safe practice within a childminder's home for the purpose of minimising the transmission of the COVID-19 virus. The continued application of the guidance will be kept under review. Department of Health Minimum Standards will continue to apply. The number of families a childminder can provide childcare for will rise to 5 families in August. Subject to medical and scientific advice, it is expected that childminders will be working to full capacity</p>

	from September 2020. This will be subject to parental demand for their services.
Increased informal childcare capacity	From 11 June 2020, informal Childcare, that is, childcare which is generally provided free of charge by relatives and friends can be provided under Support Bubble arrangements. 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. Under the current accepted and agreed support bubble model, a family could access the support of a parent, grandparent, sibling or friend of one of the parents, who lives alone, for childcare purposes. The rules that will apply to the support bubble more generally will apply to the childcare support bubble, including restrictions on using those who are considered clinically vulnerable for childcare purposes.
Indemnification	Between 1 July and 31 August 2020, indemnification letters will be issued to childcare providers, who are providing childcare services, against COVID-19 related incidents, when confirmation relating to re-opening is received from a Health and Social Care Trust.
Alignment with school restart plans	School restart plans are in the process of being developed. It will be important to ensure that there is alignment between school restart plans and childcare provision to ensure that the impact on working parents from September 2020 is kept to a minimum. If a child is not at school, then the availability of childcare may be essential in some cases.
Financial support: re-opening grants	The current financial support scheme (the COVID-19 Childcare Sector Support Scheme) will come to an end at 30 June 2020. The purpose of the scheme was to support a sector at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when most childcare providers were forced to close, mainly as a result of a significant reduction in parental demand for childcare services in response to <i>Stay at Home</i> requirements. It is intended to provide further financial support to the sector to assist it to re-open. The details of the scheme are being finalised.