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Clerk to the Committee for Education
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5 August 2024

Dear Aoibhinn,

During an evidence session on early learning and childcare provided by departmental officials on 5 June 2024, Committee members requested an update on progress during the summer months.

Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICCS)

Work to develop and deliver the new Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme (NICSS) is well advanced. Early Years - the organisation for children and young people (EYO) has been appointed to manage the scheme. They have developed a bespoke online portal which will enable providers and parents to register for the subsidy. It will also be used to process claims and make payments. The portal is in place and training in its use is underway.

In parallel, DE officials have been working with EYO to confirm any remaining operational details and eligibility rules for the scheme. Both the Department and EYO have published on their websites, detailed guidance and Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) for parents and providers ([DE website link](#) and [EYO website link](#)). These are updated regularly.

As of 5 August 2024, 1,385 providers have pre-registered for information about the subsidy including 260 daycare settings, 75 playgroups and 1,050 childminders. The next phase of the rollout (from 5 to 18 August) will involve parents registering online, with the scheme due to go live towards the end of August. The data collected as part of the administration of the scheme will help assess the impact of the subsidy, as well as provide intelligence on parents' usage of, and expenditure on childcare which will inform future strategy development.

DE officials and EYO staff have been engaging regularly with key stakeholders and will continue to do so.

Pre-school Education Programme (PSEP) - Standardisation

DE and EA are working closely together to plan for the standardisation of PSEP session length and the EA has been provided with extensive guidance to enable it to prepare the first 100 pre-school settings to transition to deliver at least 22.5 hours pre-school education per week from September 2025. A PSEP standardisation information page has been launched at [Pre-School Education Programme - Standardisation | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/pre-school-education-programme-standardisation) and will be updated regularly to provide information on progress.

Sector Support and Stabilisation

Work has been completed to define the stabilisation requirements of a range of existing early years schemes and identify opportunities for enhancement. This includes activity across a number of departments and has been informed by the Task and Finish Group. Letters of allocation are being prepared. Engagement with DoH, DfE and Invest Northern Ireland is ongoing to progress the development of a Targeted Business Support Scheme using a co-design process.

Data Collection

DE officials have been working with NIRSA to design a survey of parents which will examine their choices and preferences in respect of childcare provision. This will enhance the evidence base to inform longer-term strategy development. The survey design is well advanced and NISRA proposes to launch it in autumn 2024.

I trust this information is helpful.

Yours sincerely

Ruth Galwey

Ruth Galwey
Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer