

FROM THE OFFICE OF THE MINISTER



MLAs, Pre-School Settings, Representative Bodies and
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EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE STRATEGY – STANDARDISATION OF THE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMME: SCOPING STUDY

As you may be aware, the development of an Executive Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) Strategy, including the standardisation of pre-school education programme (PSEP) sessions, remains one of my top priorities.

Currently, PSEP provision is a mix of approximately 40% full-time (minimum of 22.5 hours per week) and 60% part-time (minimum of 12.5 hours per week). The evidence for providing at least 22.5 hours pre-school education per week is strong in terms of its impact on supporting social and emotional development and preparing children for school. I am committed to maximising this long-term positive impact on children's development as well as ensuring that their families can benefit from the difference that a longer pre-school day can have in terms of alleviating the financial strain many are experiencing with the costs of childcare and have therefore prioritised the aim of standardising all pre-school sessions funded through the PSEP to at least 22.5 hours.

In order to assess the costs involved in the implementation of a standardised session length and inform the development of a transition plan, RSM UK Consulting LLP (RSM) were appointed by the Department in late 2022 to conduct a scoping study for the standardisation of the Pre-school Education Programme (PSEP), along with the National Children's Bureau (NCB), Professor Ted Melhuish, and Dr. Glenda Walsh. The scoping study involved analysis of three strands:

1. **Current state of the sector** in terms of:
 - I. readiness of individual settings to deliver the standardised offer of 22.5 hours per week; and

- II. identification of opportunities for greater alignment between statutory and non-statutory settings to benefit pre-school pupils as part of a standardised offer.
2. **Training and qualification requirements**, including the suitability of the qualifications and experience of the current workforce, an assessment of the benefits of graduate-led provision, and costed options for a programme of continued professional development (CPD) to support the delivery of a high-quality, standardised pre-school offer.
3. **Advice and support** currently available to pre-school settings and costed options for models for delivering consistent and high-quality advice and support for all PSEP settings to support the delivery of a high-quality, standardised pre-school offer.

The scoping study involved a mixed-methods approach, including desk research, interviews with 30 pre-school education practitioners and 24 early years representatives, regular engagement and ongoing validation of findings with sector representatives and a detailed survey of all funded pre-school education settings participating in the PSEP (85% response rate). The final report from the study has now been received and provides a detailed analysis of the sector and a range of costed options for standardisation.

In addition to the core objective of providing all children with 22.5 hours per week of pre-school education, it identifies and costs a range of potential additional actions relating to issues such as staffing ratios, meals, training, advice and support. The scale of what I can do initially has largely been determined by the budget allocated by the Executive. £25m has been earmarked for an ELC Strategy in the current financial year, with £5m of that assigned for PSEP standardisation. While this is less than I had hoped to secure, it will allow me to begin the process of transitioning pre-school sessions to 22.5 hours and I hope to transition approximately 2,200 pre-school places for September 2025 subject to business case approval. I may widen the parameters of the project should additional resources become available.

Pre-school standardisation will be the most significant expansion of early years developmental provision in over 25 years and, building upon the successful partnership of statutory and non-statutory provision that currently delivers the PSEP, will have a lasting impact on the lives of children in Northern Ireland for decades to come.

It is my intention that the current position, where sufficient funded pre-school education places are made available in all areas to accommodate every target aged child whose parents want a place for them, will be retained at every stage of the process. I appreciate that many settings will be keen to transition to the standardised session length as quickly as possible, however, this will require careful planning and implementation over a period of time and so I ask for your patience in this regard.

Now that I have secured initial resources to enable work to begin, the Department and the Education Authority will work quickly to establish teams to plan and progress this

as a priority. Settings need not take any action at this stage as officials will make contact with those impacted as planning for standardisation progresses.

The full report, together with additional information on the standardisation programme is published on the Department of Education's website at [Pre-School Education Programme - Standardisation | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/pre-school-education-programme-standardisation).

I look forward to engaging with you as this work proceeds.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Paul Givan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Paul Givan MLA
Minister of Education