

Ministerial Announcement

ANNOUNCEMENT FROM THE HEALTH AND EDUCATION MINISTERS ON CHILDCARE PROVISION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

This announcement sets out the arrangements that we have put in place to provide childcare for vulnerable children and the children of key workers across Northern Ireland.

Registered childcare provision, pre-school education settings and schools are safe and nurturing environments for children. However, we need to keep to a minimum the number of children in educational or childcare settings in line with public health advice.

Childcare settings and childminders are enabling key workers to go to work knowing that those who are most precious to them, are in safe hands and receiving the best possible care.

Many schools across Northern Ireland are providing supervised learning for children who are vulnerable, or whose parents are critical to the COVID-19 response, so they can continue to work, where alternative childcare arrangements cannot be made. Supported by the Education Authority, some are doing it on a cluster basis to serve the needs of children within a geographic area. Schools are also ensuring that a wide variety of remote learning materials and support are available for children who are able to stay at home.

We acknowledge that a number of daycare and afterschool care settings have already closed, some in response to falling demand, insufficient staff coverage, or difficulties in complying with public health guidance, particularly in relation to social distancing requirements.

Our starting position remains unchanged. Where it is possible to do so, children should be cared for in their own homes. Schools, pre-school education settings, registered daycare facilities and childminders should only be providing care for the children of key workers and vulnerable children.

KEY WORKER AND VULNERABLE CHILD

What we mean by key worker and vulnerable child for registered daycare and childminding purposes is included at the link below :-

<https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/Content/uploads/userUploads/Key%20workers%208%20Apr.pdf>

We acknowledge that the definitions are more restrictive than those applied to schools and pre-schools. Our rationale for this is that, unlike the majority of schools, there are physical space limitations in daycare and childminding settings. Subject to being able to provide childcare safely, we can widen the definition over time and will

keep this under constant review. It will, in part, be determined by the demand for childcare, which we accept may change as time goes on.

PACKAGE OF CHILDCARE MEASURES

We have developed a package of measures as set out below.

A Bespoke Approved Home Childcarer Scheme

This Scheme is intended to enable childcare workers, who provide childcare to children in daycare and school age childcare facilities to be matched to parents and their children. Under the Scheme, children are cared for in their own homes. Given the experience of some parents recently, which was reported in the media, we have asked daycare providers to continue to act as employers under the Scheme. This will mean that parents will continue to pay their usual fees to their provider, therefore not incurring any additional costs. Government will meet any additional costs incurred by the provider relating to salary and the management of an employee who becomes an approved home childcarer under the Scheme. Employers for Childcare will provide advice and guidance on the Scheme for parents, daycare providers and approved home childcarers. We will keep this Scheme under review.

Enhanced Childminder Support

Registered childminders play a critical role in terms of childcare provision in Northern Ireland. We have asked them to support the needs of vulnerable children and the children of key workers during this period and, in response to a survey conducted recently, a large number of them have indicated that they want to be part of the collective effort to meet demand. In light of the restrictions we have placed on them and the additional demands we have made of them in terms of infection control practice, we will financially support childminders who provide childcare for key workers and vulnerable children over the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Where childminders are able to offer childcare in the child's own home, we will put in place a fast track approval process to make that possible, similar to the bespoke scheme above. The Northern Ireland Childminding Association will assist in matching parents with childminders, where this is required.

Childcare Settings

We will need to continue to meet the childcare needs of some children in registered daycare and school-age care settings. We know that many settings have now closed and this package is also intended to help support those that have been forced to close to ensure that we can either facilitate them to re-open or get them up and running and working to full capacity when the Pandemic ends. We hope that a significant number of childcare providers will be able to avail of the financial assistance schemes recently announced by the Economy Minister, Diane Dodds, which offers support and assistance to small businesses. More detail on the additional measures we will put in place to support settings that have closed will follow as quickly as possible.

Our focus at this stage is on sustaining those settings which continue to operate, or wish to reopen, to provide care for vulnerable children and the children of key workers who are struggling to find places. The plan has always been to do this as safely as possible. We know that settings will have to operate with very restricted numbers in the current circumstances while at the same time, trying to enable as many key workers as possible to continue working.

Health and Social Care Trusts have been asked to do three things. Firstly, to identify the unmet childcare needs of their staff; secondly, to identify the number of settings which continue to operate in their areas; and finally, to match the children of key workers and vulnerable children to those settings, operating at all times within the boundaries of safe care. We know this will lead to a loss of income for settings and risks their continued viability. For this reason, we will put financial resilience measures in place to support them. If we continue to have unmet need, HSC Trusts will work with settings that have closed to support them to reopen in the locations where key worker parents need them most. Initially, demand is anticipated to be close to our major hospitals and that will be our priority. In the current circumstances, we may need settings to open for longer than their normal hours, for 7 days a week if necessary. Again, we will ask Trusts to work with providers to determine what is required and support them to make that possible.

Support for Parents

The parent helpline, Parentline, will provide information for parents and direct them quickly to sources of childcare support. The Family Support NI website will also be a source of information for parents, including information on where childcare places are available. Daycare providers and childminders will need to support us by ensuring that they update their HSC Trust Early Years Team and the FamilySupportNI register with any change in their capacity to provide childcare so parents can find places as quickly as possible.

Support for Childcare Providers, including Childminders and Approved Home Childcarers

We know that guidance is essential at this time, particularly guidance relating to how to protect children and staff and how settings and providers will need to operate in compliance with COVID-19 requirements. We have already made some guidance available and we will continue to add to available guidance if necessary. We are also looking at other support mechanisms for providers.

FUNDING

We are putting in place a significant funding package to support the measures outlined above. Any financial support to approved home childcarers, childcare providers or childminders will take account of any wider financial support which is introduced in Northern Ireland as part of the COVID-19 response.

OUR THANKS

It is essential that we work together across the education and health sectors to ensure that vulnerable children and those of key frontline staff can access safe and

responsive provision. We know that we can rely on your commitment and professionalism and we want to thank schools, pre-school education settings and registered childcare providers for all the work they do to support children and parents. Your continued support at this critical time will be vital in helping us work together to deal with the challenges facing our society as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak.

Without doubt, these are unprecedented times which have forced all of us to rethink what we do and how we do it. We need your support more than ever over the next few months and we are committed to supporting you in return.

Further information, including definitions, advice for parents and guidance for childcare providers can be accessed at:

<https://www.familysupportni.gov.uk/Support/91/covid19-childcare-options-and-associated-guidance>.

Robin Swann, Minister of Health
Peter Weir, Minister of Education

