

EXECUTIVE EARLY LEARNING AND CHILDCARE (ELC) STRATEGY

PACKAGE OF MEASURES FOR 2024/25 FINANCIAL YEAR

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)

What is the purpose of the FAQs?

These FAQs aim to provide answers to common questions about the package of ELC measures announced by the Minister of Education on 23rd May 2024. Some of the measures proposed are currently under development with operational details yet to be confirmed. This FAQs will be updated and augmented on an ongoing basis so please check frequently for the latest information.

What is the remit of the Executive ELC Strategy?

The overarching policy aims of the ELC Strategy are to support children with their learning and development and enable parents (especially mothers) to work by improving the affordability of childcare.

Links

The FAQs have been split into the following sections and clicking on the link will take you to that section.

- [Expansion and Stabilisation of existing ELC provision](#)
- [Targeted Business Support Scheme](#)
- [Full-time pre-school place for all children through standardisation of the pre-school education programme \(PSEP\)](#)
- [Northern Ireland Childcare Subsidy Scheme \(NICSS\) advice for parents](#)
- [Data Collection](#)

SECTION ONE

EXPANSION AND STABILISATION OF EXISTING ELC PROVISION

1.1 What does expansion and stabilisation of existing early years provision mean?

£7.1m has been allocated to cover a range of existing ELC funding programmes/schemes to consolidate and expand this vital core provision. This funding will support sector viability going forward and ensure a focus on children's outcomes. This investment will strengthen and expand the foundation on which the longer-term Strategy can be built.

1.2 What existing programmes will receive additional funding in 2024/25?

Targeted programmes such as Sure Start, Pathway and Toybox will receive additional investment to ensure they are able to maintain and expand their support for those children at greatest risk of poor outcomes. Additional funding will also be provided to a range of other early years programmes, details of which have yet to be confirmed.

1.3 Do current providers of existing programmes need to do anything to secure the additional funding in 2024/25?

No. Work is ongoing with relevant delivery partners for existing programmes to notify them of the additional funding as soon as possible.

TARGETED BUSINESS SUPPORT SCHEME

1.4 What is the targeted business support scheme?

A targeted business support scheme for childcare providers is being developed to assist those in significant financial difficulty and in areas where the demand for childcare exceeds supply.

1.5 Will all childcare providers including childminders and school age childcare providers be eligible for support?

Yes. The fund will include support for registered childcare providers including childminders and school age childcare providers where this is deemed appropriate in line with the fund's objectives and eligibility requirements.

1.6 What is the eligibility criteria and process for applying to this scheme?

This will be an application-based scheme. The specific eligibility criteria and associated application forms are under development. Further information will be available in due course.

1.7 When will the Scheme be open for applications?

It is anticipated that the fund will be operational from September/October 2024.

SECTION TWO

FULL-TIME PRE-SCHOOL PLACE FOR ALL CHILDREN THROUGH STANDARDISATION OF THE PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION PROGRAMME (PSEP)

Information on the standardisation of the PSEP is covered by separate FAQs available at the following link

[Pre-School Standardisation – Frequently Asked Questions | Department of Education \(education-ni.gov.uk\)](https://www.education-ni.gov.uk/pre-school-standardisation-frequently-asked-questions)

SECTION THREE

NORTHERN IRELAND CHILDCARE SUBSIDY SCHEME (NICSS)

ADVICE FOR PARENTS

3.1 What is the NICSS?

The NICSS is a subsidy scheme introduced by the Department of Education (DE) on behalf of the Northern Ireland Executive to help working parents with the cost of childcare.

3.2 Who is eligible for the subsidy scheme?

Working parents eligible for Tax Free Childcare (TFC) with children who have not yet started primary school are eligible for the subsidy.

3.3 When will the subsidy scheme start?

The scheme is expected to start in September 2024, provided everything goes as planned. Further details will be available as soon as possible.

3.4 How do I qualify for the subsidy scheme?

Your child must be of eligible age and you must be eligible for TFC. Your provider must also be signed up to the TFC scheme. If you are unsure about your eligibility for TFC, please contact HMRC Childcare Service helpline on 0300 123 4097 or at [Childcare Service helpline - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk).

3.5 Why is the subsidy scheme linked to TFC eligibility?

The Executive has agreed that the subsidy scheme should focus on working parents eligible for TFC with children who have not started primary school. Linking the scheme to TFC ensures the subsidy is targeted at working parents more likely to be incurring higher childcare costs, streamlines the eligibility checking process and minimises displacement of other existing financial support for parents. The subsidy scheme adopts a similar approach to TFC in that the amount which can be claimed is a percentage of total childcare costs.

3.6 Will parents using Childcare Vouchers be eligible for the subsidy scheme?

No. The NICSS will only be available for parents who can demonstrate their eligibility for TFC through a TFC account. TFC is the current Government supported scheme and is open to all who meet the eligibility criteria. The Childcare Voucher scheme was the predecessor to TFC and closed to new entrants in 2018. Parents still using Childcare Vouchers who are eligible for TFC can transfer to TFC at any point in order to benefit from the NICSS.

3.7 Why can't parents who use Childcare Vouchers access the subsidy scheme?

The Childcare Voucher and TFC schemes have different rules, different eligibility criteria and provide different levels of support. The Executive has agreed that those eligible for TFC should be the focus of the NICSS. Eligibility for Childcare Vouchers is also wider than for TFC (e.g. both parents do not have to be working). Providing the 15% subsidy to all those using vouchers would be unfair on families not eligible for TFC (e.g. where only one parent is working) but who would have qualified for the voucher scheme if it had still been open to them.

3.8 Can those claiming Childcare Vouchers move to TFC?

Not all those claiming vouchers will be eligible for TFC. For advice contact Make the Call Service on free phone 0800 232 1271, email makethecall@dfcni.gov.uk or Employers for Childcare Family (EFC) Benefits Advice Service 028 92678200.

3.9 Why can those on vouchers who meet the TFC eligibility criteria not remain on the voucher scheme and receive the subsidy under the NICSS?

Providing the subsidy to TFC eligible parents who wish to remain on the voucher scheme because they are better off doing so would be unfair and introduce additional administrative complexity and cost. All those on vouchers who meet TFC eligibility criteria can transfer to TFC at any point and benefit from the subsidy.

3.10 If I am currently a voucher user and meet the TFC eligibility criteria, should I move to TFC?

The decision depends on your specific circumstances. For advice contact Make the Call Service on free phone 0800 232 1271, email makethecall@dfcni.gov.uk or EFC Family Benefits Advice Service on 028 92678200.

3.11 How is the subsidy expected to work in practice?

Operational details are currently being developed and will be provided in the coming weeks. It is anticipated that providers will reduce the normal fee charged to eligible parents by 15%. Your bill/invoice should show the normal fee, the 15% subsidy and the net amount you will be expected to pay. Parents can then obtain a further 20% contribution towards their reduced bill from TFC and pay their provider in the usual way using their TFC account.

3.12 Will there be a maximum limit or cap on the amount that can be claimed under the subsidy scheme?

It is intended to set a monthly upper limit or cap that can be claimed per child under the subsidy scheme to ensure equitable distribution of the funds available however most parents are not expected to reach it. The upper limit will be monitored and kept

under review. Details of this are currently being considered and will be available in advance of the scheme's launch.

3.13 If I use two childcare providers for the same child, can I receive the subsidy on both bills?

Yes. The subsidy can be claimed on your total childcare costs for all eligible children, subject to the monthly upper limit (per child) not being exceeded.

3.14 Does receiving the subsidy affect my eligibility for TFC or the maximum claim limits/caps under TFC?

No. The subsidy scheme is separate and does not affect your TFC eligibility or the TFC caps.

3.15 Will my provider be reimbursed for the subsidy and what do I need to know?

The subsidy provided to parents can be claimed back by providers directly from the scheme administrator. This ensures that the provider can offer the subsidy without any financial loss. Detailed information on this process will be developed in consultation with providers over the next few months.

3.16 How will I know if my provider is offering the subsidy?

As the scheme will not start until September 2024, your provider will not be able to confirm details until nearer the time.

3.17 Will the subsidy be offered by all types of childcare providers, including childminders?

The subsidy can be offered by all registered childcare providers that are signed up to the TFC scheme and can register a child below primary school age. This includes nurseries, playgroups and childminders. It does not apply to unregistered or informal childcare arrangements. Further engagement with providers will take place in the coming weeks.

3.18 Can parents on Universal Credit access the subsidy?

No. Parents who receive financial support for childcare under Universal Credit are not eligible for the subsidy scheme. If you are unsure about your eligibility for Universal Credit, please contact the Make the Call service on free phone 0800 232 1271 or e-mail makethecall@dfcni.gov.uk.

3.19 Can I receive the subsidy if I work part-time?

Yes, as long as your child has not started primary school and you meet the TFC eligibility criteria. Your provider must also be registered and signed up to the TFC scheme.

3.20 If my child is in the pre-school education programme (PSEP) can I get the 15% subsidy on any additional costs made by the PSEP provider?

No. Your child's PSEP place is funded by the Education Authority and providers may not charge for it. If a provider wishes to request voluntary contributions from parents for PSEP, they may do so, provided that it is made explicit that all contributions are entirely voluntary. The subsidy scheme is about childcare costs therefore voluntary contributions for PSEP cannot be claimed through the subsidy scheme.

3.21 If my child is in the PSEP, can I access the subsidy for any additional childcare costs I have outside of PSEP?

Yes, you can claim for childcare costs for wrap around services outside of PSEP, as long as you meet the eligibility criteria.

3.22 Will the subsidy scheme provide financial support for childcare costs for children with special needs/disability?

Yes, the subsidy scheme aims to support all eligible working parents, including those with children who have special educational needs/disabilities (SEN/D), as long as they meet the criteria for TFC and the childcare provider is registered and participating in the scheme.

3.23 How does the NICSS interact with the HMRC TFC system?

They are separate systems. However, eligibility to TFC will be used to determine eligibility to the NICSS. Any TFC-related queries should be directed to the Make the Call service on 0800 232 1271, e-mail makethecall@dfcni.gov.uk, the Childcare Service helpline on 0300 123 4097 or EFC Family Benefits Advice Service 028 92678200. It is expected that a dedicated helpline will be established to provide advice on NICSS-related queries. Details are still being developed. If you are unsure about your eligibility for TFC, please contact HMRC Childcare Service helpline on 0300 123 4097 or at [Childcare Service helpline - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk).

3.24 Who will administer the subsidy scheme?

Early Years – the organisation for young children has been appointed as the scheme administrator to work with providers and parents.

3.25 When will I get further information about the scheme?

These FAQs will be regularly updated with information as it becomes available.

3.26 How long can I receive the subsidy for?

You can receive the subsidy as long as you are eligible and using TFC and your child has not started primary school. The scheme currently has approval from the Executive to run for September 2024 to March 2025.

3.27 What do I need to do now to access the subsidy?

Nothing at the moment. Further details will be available as soon as possible.

3.28 Can you provide an example of how the subsidy might work?

The following table sets out an example of how the subsidy and TFC might impact on the monthly childcare bill of a parent eligible to the subsidy:

(1) Monthly fee normally charged by provider to a parent	£1,000
(2) NICSS subsidy (15% of normal fee) made by provider	£150
(3) Reduced monthly fee charged by provider to an eligible parent under the subsidy scheme	£850
(4) Tax free childcare discount claimed by a parent through their TFC account (20%)	£170
(5) Net cost of fees to parent	£680

3.29 When will more details about the subsidy scheme be made available to childcare providers?

Early Years – the organisation for young children has been appointed as the scheme administrator. Further engagement with providers will take place in the coming weeks.

SECTION FOUR

DATA COLLECTION

4.1 What is the data collection exercise?

A data collection exercise will be taken forward to help evaluate the 2024/25 package of measures and provide an evidence base on which further informed decisions can be taken regarding longer-term models of support. This will involve data collection from both childcare providers and parents.

4.2 How will data be collected?

In cooperation with childcare providers, some data will be collected as part of the NICSS. The detailed requirements are currently being considered.

The Department of Health through the Family Support Northern Ireland website already collects data or has the capability to collect data from providers on a range of issues including the number of registered places, fees, whether a setting is registered for TFC, the provider's ability to support children with disabilities etc. We are considering how this data can be more effectively utilised to facilitate analysis and inform future policy development.

In addition, it is expected that the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) will be taking forward a parental survey which may collect information about different childcare arrangements which parents have in place for children at different times of the day, including the use of breakfast clubs, after-school clubs, the number of hours of childcare for children of different ages and the costs etc.

4.3 When will data collection commence?

Data collection from providers will commence with the introduction of the subsidy scheme in September 2024.

It is anticipated that the parental survey will commence in Autumn 2024.