Employers For Childcare

Last updated: January 2026 for the 2026-27 academic year

NB: this factsheet will be updated for the 2027-2028 academic year when all information becomes available

Funded Pre-school Places: Information for parents

Note that this factsheet applies to Northern Ireland only. For more information on schemes in other parts of the UK, visit: www.gov.uk/find-free-early-education

In Northern Ireland, children are entitled to a 'funded' pre-school place in the year before they start their first year of primary school. These places are funded by the Department of Education and are not compulsory. They are intended to build upon the learning that children experience at home and provide a rich variety of challenging play activities and other experiences in a stimulating environment to help prepare children for primary school.

The scheme is intended to provide high quality care and education for children in their **final pre-school year** (when the child has turned three). Some providers accept applications for children in their **penultimate pre-school year** (when the child has turned two), but strict admissions criteria apply, giving preference to children in their final pre-school year.

A pre-school place is normally provided across five sessions per week, each lasting 2.5 hours per day (part time) or, in some cases, 4.5 hours per day (full time), during the school year. In May 2024, the Education Minister Paul Givan reiterated previously announced plans to standardise pre-school provision, offering all children 22.5 hours of funded pre-school education per week. To date 105 settings have already transitioned 12.5 to 22.5 hours per week with a further 100 pre-school setting intending to transition to deliver 22.5 hours from September 2026 or as soon as possible thereafter.

Places are provided by nursery schools, primary schools with nursery units and some voluntary and private sector providers. Voluntary and private sector providers can only offer part time sessions. The places cannot be provided by childminders.

The Department of Education's guidance stipulates that funded pre-school places are not to be regarded as childcare. This factsheet aims to help clarify who is eligible, how to apply, and where to access more information.

Further information about pre-school admissions is available on the Education Authority website: https://www.eani.org.uk/parents/admissions/pre-school-admissions-guide

Who should apply?

Parents of children who are entering their final pre-school year, i.e. have turned three on or before 1 July of the year they are due to start pre-school, are encouraged to apply for a pre-school place. For a pre-school place for the academic year beginning September 2026 the child's third birthday should fall between 2 July 2025 and 1 July 2026, that is, they were born on or between 2 July 2022 and 1 July 2023.

If you apply for your child who is underage, that is they were born on or between 2 July 2023 and 1 July 2024, they may be admitted but only after target age children are admitted and if funded places remain.

Why should I apply?

Pre-school education is not compulsory, however there is strong evidence to suggest that high quality pre-school education has positive outcomes for children and can contribute to their long-term development, as well as facilitate their transition into primary school.

What if my child is young for their year, and I feel they are not ready?

New legislation now allows parents of children who are young for their year to defer the start of pre-school and, in turn, primary school for their child for one year.

Deferral of pre-school means delaying your child starting pre-school for one year from September 2026 to September 2027. Your child would then in turn delay starting primary school until September 2028. This would mean your child would start pre-school aged 4 and primary school aged 5. Your child would then (unless in very unusual circumstances such as serious illness) remain within this year group throughout their time at school.

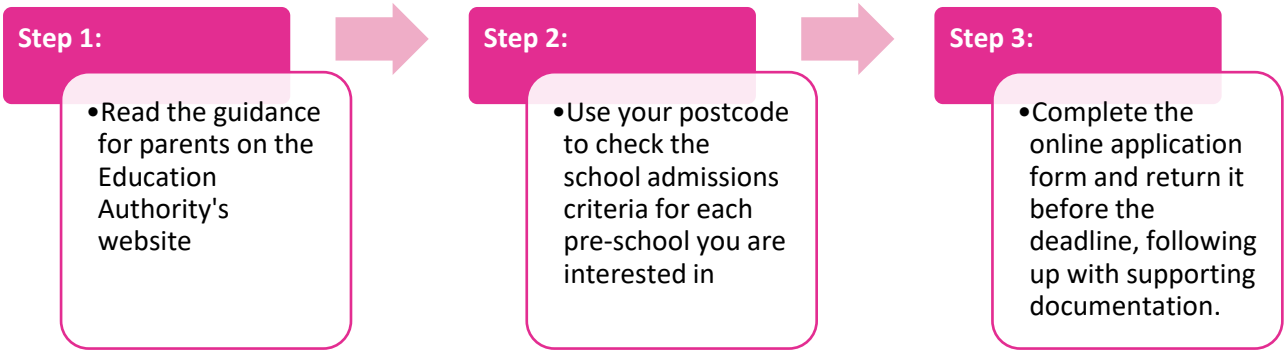
These arrangements apply to children born on or between 1 April 2023 and 1 July 2023 and any child who was born before 1 April 2023 but who was due to be born on or after 1 April 2023 if born at term.

Further information on the deferral of pre-school and school starting age is available at www.eani.org.uk/parents/pupil-applications-and-grants/admissions/deferral-of-school-starting-age

How do I apply?

You can find information and how to apply online for admission to pre-school for the 2026 - 2027 school year on the Education Authority's website. If you have any difficulty or require further support with the application contact the Admissions Helpdesk on 028 9047 0177 or email preschooladmissions@eani.org.uk.

We advise parents to carefully examine the Education Authority's Pre-School Admission Guide, and the admissions criteria which apply to pre-school providers in your area offering funded places. Schools may hold a small number of reference booklets containing admissions criteria for parents to view and can also provide hard copy application forms if required.



When should I apply?

Each year, the Department for Education announces when the Parent Portal will open, and when it will close to applicants. In 2026, the online Portal opening date was Wednesday 7 January at 12 noon and closing date Wednesday 21 January at 12 noon. Supporting documentation must have been received by Monday 26 January at 4pm.

The required supporting documentation will include your child's birth certificate and any other documents as specified by the provider in the published admissions criteria. If you are unsure what is required, contact your first preference pre-school provider to find out what additional documentation they need to process your application.

What if I have missed the closing date?

If your application form is not received by the closing date, it will be treated as late.

If your chosen pre-school provider is oversubscribed with applications for children in their final pre-school year, then preference will be given to applications which were received by the closing date, regardless of how your child has met the admissions criteria.

If you are applying for a place for your child's final pre-school year, and your chosen provider is not oversubscribed, then your application will take preference over any applications received on time for younger children in their penultimate pre-school year.

What are the criteria?

Having your child's name on a 'waiting list' from birth does not guarantee a pre-school place, you will still need to apply for admission. Settings must adhere to strict admissions criteria, published in the Education Authority's prospectus. Each provider will have its own set of criteria which may include:

- Children whose parents receive certain means-tested benefits.
- Children whose application lists that particular setting as first preference.
- Children who have siblings who have attended, or have parents employed by the setting (or in the case of nursery units, those who attend or are employed by the adjoining school).
- Children who live nearest to the setting.

The criteria states that places will be allocated on the basis of distance from home to the pre-school. Can I use a friend or family member's address instead?

No. The address you use on your child's application must be the home address at which they are currently resident. It cannot be that of a childminder or grandparent's home, or any other address which is not their normal residence.
The Education Authority requires that parents provide proof of the information given on the application form, you will be advised on what documentation to supply.

If you are planning to move house before the beginning of the school year, you should indicate this on your application for each school you are applying to, giving as much information as possible about the planned date of moving and address, if known.

When will I find out what pre-school my child has been allocated?

Parents should receive notification of the outcome of their pre-school application from Monday 23 March 2026 when pre-schools will send out notification of the outcome for Stage 1 Target Age applications via email, where one is held, or by letter.
From Tuesday 19 May 2026 pre-schools will send out notification of the outcome for Stage 2 including Underage applications via email, where one is held, or by letter.
The Education Authority will notify parents of children yet to secure a place. Parents may submit an appeal if they are not content with the outcome of the application process.

Where can I get more information?

If additional information is required or any difficulty is experienced, parents can contact the admissions helpdesk on **028 9047 0177** or email the relevant address listed below:

- Pre-School Admissions: preschooladmissions@eani.org.uk
- Primary School Admissions: primaryadmissions@eani.org.uk
- Post-Primary School Admissions: postprimaryadmissions@eani.org.uk
- 14+ Senior High School Admissions (Dickson Plan):seniorhighadmissions@eani.org.uk

Once you have identified some possible settings for your child, you may wish to visit each setting to assess its suitability. Many pre-school settings will hold open days in the weeks leading up to the closing date, giving you an overview of what they offer.

Parents can read further information on the pre-school admission procedure on the Education Authority's website.

For further information on pre-school places, or any childcare or work-related issue, contact our Family Benefits Advice Service on fbas@employersforchildcare.org.