

Budget 2016: Expansion of Free Pre-School

Currently, children are entitled to participate in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme for up to 38 weeks – i.e. for the pre-school year. Children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months on 1st September of the relevant year are eligible to join the programme. Children register for the programme in September. Budget 2016 announced significant changes to free pre-school provision in Ireland; these changes are explained in more detail below.

1. What changes were announced for free pre-school in Budget 2016?

As a result of additional funding provided in Budget 2016, children will be able to start in free pre-school when they reach age 3 and to remain in free pre-school until they transfer to primary school (provided that they are not older than 5 ½ years at the end of the pre-school year). To make sure that children can benefit from free pre-school as soon as they are eligible, parents will be able to enrol their children at three different points during the year: September, January and April. Providing free pre-school for children from the age of 3 was a key recommendation of the *Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy*.

2. When will the Budget 2016 changes to free pre-school take effect?

The Budget 2016 changes to free pre-school apply from September 2016.

QUESTIONS FROM PARENTS

3. **NEW!** My child benefited from free pre-school last year (2014/5) but is still eligible to participate now. Can they return to free pre-school in the current academic year?

The Budget 2016 announcement to provide free pre-school to every child from age three until they transfer to primary school takes effect from September 2016. Therefore until then, it is current eligibility that determines access to free pre-school. This means that as has your child has already benefited from that entitlement in 2014/15, they are not eligible to re-register for free pre-school again this year.

4. My child is in free pre-school this year. If they don't start primary school in 2016, can they stay in free pre-school for another year?

Yes. Any child currently benefiting from free pre-school will be able to remain in the programme for another year, provided that by the end of the pre-school year (i.e. 30th June 2017), the child will not be older than 5 ½ years (i.e. provided that they were born between 1st January 2012 and 31st August 2013).

5. My child was eligible to start free pre-school this year, but wasn't going to start primary school until 2017, so I decided to wait until 2016 to enrol my child in free pre-school. Can my child join free pre-school now and continue next year?

Yes. Any child who was eligible to join the programme in September 2015 can join free pre-school now provided there is a pre-school place available (note that to have been eligible for the programme in September 2015, a child must have been born between 2nd February 2011 and 30th June 2012). As explained above, children in this situation can also continue in the programme for a further year starting September 2016 provided that, by the end of the pre-school year (i.e. 30th June 2017), the child will not be older than 5 ½ years.

6. I have been paying for my child's pre-school since September because I was waiting to enrol my child for free-preschool next September. As I can now enrol my child in free pre-school, am I entitled to a refund?

Your pre-school provider has 8 weeks from the date your child started attending the service to apply for a free pre-school place to be approved. If your child's start date was more than 8 weeks ago, your provider can still register your child using a 'registration request', stating that the Budget 2016 announcement is the reason for delay on the applying for the place. Once the free pre-school place is approved and your provider receives payment for your child, they must refund you for the free pre-school place.

7. If I don't want my child to go to pre-school for five days per week, can they still benefit from free pre-school?

Yes. Your child doesn't have to attend for five days per week in order to avail of free pre-school. However, your pre-school provider must agree to take your child on a part-time basis. Bear in mind that if a parent, for example, enrolls a child for three days per week, the pre-school provider will only be paid by Government for the days the child attends. A provider may not be able to find a child to take the place for the other two days a week, so this arrangement may not be financially viable for pre-school providers. A provider may prefer to keep the place for a child who attends pre-school five days a week.

8. My child will not be aged three by 1st September 2016. Can they start in free pre-school during the 2016/17 programme year?

From September 2016, there will be three points of enrolment within the pre-school year:

- If your child's third birthday is between September and December 2016, they can enrol for free pre-school from 1st January 2017. Assuming they don't start primary school until September 2018, they will be able to continue in free pre-school for a further year from September 2017.
- If your child's third birthday is between January and March 2017, they can enrol for free pre-school from 1st April 2017. Assuming they don't start primary school until September 2018, they will be able to continue in free pre-school for a further year from September 2017.

If your child's third birthday is between April 2017 and August 2017, they can enrol for free pre-school from 1st September 2017. If your child starts primary school in September 2018, they

will be entitled to one year of free pre-school. If they don't start primary school until September 2019, then they will be entitled to two full years of free pre-school, i.e. in 2017/18, and in 2018/19.

9. How many free pre-school weeks will my child be entitled to?

The maximum number of free pre-school weeks to which a child is entitled will depend on their date of birth, and the age at which they start primary school. The following table sets out the maximum number of weeks to which a child will be entitled, depending on these circumstances:

Average number of pre-school weeks by month of birth and of enrolment in pre-school

Birth Month	Enrolment Month	Maximum no. of weeks	
		Start school age 4	Start school age 5
January–March	April	50	88
April–August	September	38	76
September–December	January	61	61*

*As the child would turn 5 ½ years by the 30th June they cannot enrol for the free-pre-school on the third rolling intake i.e. the child starts the first year in January and enrolls again in the September but cannot enrol for a third time the next September.

10. **NEW!** My child was born between July and December 2012 and is not eligible to join free pre-school until September 2016. As there will now be three enrolment dates throughout the year, why can't my child join free pre-school from January 2016?

In Budget 2016 it was announced that, from September 2016, children will be eligible to start free pre-school when they turn age 3, and can continue in free pre-school until they start primary school (once the child is not older than 5½ years at the end of the relevant pre-school year i.e. end June).

This extension of free pre-school will increase the number of children benefiting from about 67,000 to around 127,000 in a given programme year. Accommodating this expansion requires a significant increase in capacity in the pre-school sector; providers need time to implement any needed infrastructural or services changes, or to hire additional staff. The September 2016 implementation date was set to allow pre-school providers to put such measures in place. Should an earlier start date have been chosen, the likelihood is that there would not have been sufficient capacity in the sector to accommodate all children.

However, we hope that you will appreciate that this extended provision, when introduced, will ensure that from the age of three, all children in Ireland will be able to access free education, either in pre-school or in primary school. This is a significant step forward for children and families.

11. NEW! My daughter was born between September and December, so she'll be able to start in free pre-school in January 2017, and will be able to stay there for a further year from September 2017 – and she'll still be under age 5 at the end of that. Why can't she stay in free pre-school for a further year (starting September 2018) before starting primary school?

The Budget 2016 announcement means that from September 2016 children will be able to enrol in free pre-school at three different points in the year – September, January and April – so that they can access free pre-school as soon as possible after they reach age 3.

This was a key recommendation of the *Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy*, which recommended that a free part-time place in early childhood care and education be available from every child's third birthday until they enter primary school. The Expert Group recognised that this would mean that the period of time a child would spend in free pre-school would vary depending on both the child's birth date and the age at which they start primary school.

The decision to allow children to register for free pre-school at three different points in the year was designed to ensure that children could access the benefits of pre-school as soon as they were old enough. As we hope you will understand, allowing children to start primary school at three different points in the year is far more logistically challenging than in the pre-school sector, and consequently all children start primary school in September.

In addition, an upper age limit for participation in free pre-school was set by the Inter-Departmental Group on Future Investment on the advice of the Department of Education and Skills. Limiting the diversity in age ranges in primary school is considered to be generally in the best interest of children, in relation to peer interaction in junior infants, as well as other educational considerations. This does mean that different children will spend different lengths of time in free pre-school, but our focus throughout in considering these issues was how to achieve the best outcomes for children.

We hope you will appreciate that this extended provision ensures that all children will be better off than in the present programme; the net effect of the improvements for children overall will be an increase of an average of 23 weeks over current entitlements. Importantly, this extended provision will also ensure that, from the age of three, all children in Ireland will be able to access free education, either in pre-school or in primary school. This is a significant step forward for children and families.

12. NEW! My child will not meet the age criteria for free pre-school next year as they will be over 5½ years before the end of the pre-school year. Will we be able to apply for an overage exemption so that my child can still avail free pre-school?

An upper age limit for participation in free pre-school was recommended by the Inter-Departmental Group on Future Investment in Childcare, on the advice of the Department of Education and Skills, as limiting the diversity in ages among students in the same primary school class is considered to be in the best interest of children, facilitating better peer interaction in junior infants as well as other educational considerations.

On this basis – with the exception of children with disabilities – no provision will be made for overage exemptions for participation in free pre-school.

13. My pre-school provider has asked for a deposit to keep a free pre-school place for my child. Is this allowed?

Pre-school providers are currently entitled to request a booking deposit to hold a free pre-school place for a child. All deposits are fully refundable when the child's entitlement to free pre-school is confirmed. This does not change with the expansion of the programme under Budget 2016; the Department of Children and Youth Affairs will keep this provision under review.

14. My child will be eligible for free pre-school in September 2016, but my preferred pre-school says they won't have room for my child, as most of the children currently enrolled in the service will be staying on for an extra year.

There are currently a significant number of vacancies among pre-school providers and some providers will expand to avail of the additional investment (for example by providing an extra class in the morning, or possibly expanding to make free pre-school available in the afternoon). It may take a few months for providers to decide if and how they will expand their service in late 2016 or early 2017. The implementation date of September 2016 was chosen so that providers would have time to plan for extra free pre-school places.

You should be able to access a place from a suitable pre-school provider in the locality, if not your preferred provider. It will be up to individual pre-school providers to determine how many children they can take, and whether they will provide places to children who are currently attending rather than to new entrants.

15. My child will not be age three until December 2016, and will not be able to enrol for free pre-school until January 2017. Can my pre-school provider insist that I enrol my child in September, and pay for the service, until they are eligible for free pre-school from January?

Eligibility for free pre-school in the January or April intake will not be dependent on the child having been enrolled in the service since the previous September. Pre-school providers may choose to prioritise children already enrolled in the service for the January or April intake (whether those children are benefiting from free provision, or paying if the child is not eligible for free pre-school). If parents have some flexibility around the timing of the daily session – e.g. an afternoon rather than a morning session – it may be easier to secure a place with their preferred provider. However, County and City Childcare Committees will be in a position to help you identify another pre-school provider in your area with sufficient capacity to enrol your child. Each pre-school provider operates their own admission policies, and once these are within the terms of the free pre-school programme, the Department cannot interfere with them.

16. NEW! Will it be possible to split my child's free pre-school between two different pre-schools?

Yes. Your child will be required to register for free pre-school in each pre-school year. You are free to choose which pre-school you would like to enrol your child in. You can also choose to move your child from one pre-school to another during the pre-school year (subject to availability) but you will be required to give a minimum of 4 weeks' notice to your pre-school provider.

QUESTIONS FROM PARENTS OF CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

17. NEW! My child has a disability and was granted an exemption to allow their time in free pre-school to be split pro-rata over the 2014/15 and 2015/16 programme years. Can I now increase the number of days for my child in the 2015/16 programme year?

No. The Budget 2016 expansion of free pre-school takes effect from September 2016. Therefore until then, it is current eligibility that determines access to free pre-school. Accordingly, any exemption codes granted in 2014/15 based on a pro-rata split over two years cannot increase the number of free pre-school days for the current programme year (i.e. 2015/16).

18. NEW! My child has a disability and was granted an exemption to allow their time in free pre-school to be split pro-rata over the 2015/16 and 2016/17 programme years. Will this exemption still apply even though my child will be over age next year?

Yes. Any exemptions granted by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs before the Budget 2016 announcement (including applications submitted before Budget 2016 but not yet finalised) will be approved in the 2016/17 programme year.

19. NEW! My child has a disability and was granted an exemption to allow their time in free pre-school to be split pro-rata over the 2015/16 and 2016/17 programme years. Can I now increase my child's number of days in free pre-school to five per week for both programmes years?

Yes. Any exemptions granted by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs before the Budget 2016 announcement (including applications submitted before Budget 2016 but not yet finalised) will be approved in the 2016/17 programme year and the children can avail of up to five days of free pre-school per week where appropriate.

20. NEW! My child is availing of free pre-school this year and will be overage for the 2016/17 programme year but has a disability. Can I still apply to the Department of Children and Youth Affairs for an exemption to allow my child avail of free pre-school over the two programme years (2015/16 and 2016/17)?

From September 2016, a new model - 'Supporting Access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability' – will be in place. This model will provide for the inclusion of children with a disability in the free pre-school programme, including the provision of exemptions where deemed appropriate. Further details in relation to this model will be available in early 2016.

Any exemptions granted by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs before the Budget 2016 announcement (including applications submitted before Budget 2016 but not yet finalised) will be approved in the 2016/17 programme year.

QUESTIONS FROM PRE-SCHOOL PROVIDERS

21. I would like to expand my pre-school service, but I am not sure whether my planning permission would allow it.

The first step is to check the position with your local Planning Authority, to clarify whether the planning permission and/or planning conditions for your service specify, for example, hours of operation or numbers of children.

- If your existing planning permission isn't specific as to particular hours of operation, or numbers of children, there may be flexibility to increase capacity by operating additional sessions.
- However, where the planning permission for your service does specify particular hours of operation, or numbers of children, or if you wish to extend your premises in order to increase your capacity, you will need to apply for planning permission.

While the Department of Environment and Local Government states that valid applications for planning permission will generally be dealt with in 12 weeks, this period can vary, particularly if the Local Authority needs to seek further information from the applicant. The timescale involved in most planning applications is outlined below:

Timescale	Action
Start Notice	Published in newspaper and site notice erected
2 weeks later	Latest date for lodging application
Between 2–5 weeks	Application is validated by the Planning Authority. Submissions or objections are considered.
Between 5–8 weeks later	Planning Authority issue notice of its decision on the application, or, alternatively, it may request further information.
4 weeks after the issue of Notice of Decision	If no appeal is made, the Planning Authority will issue grant of permission, or outline permission, except where it has already indicated a decision to refuse.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs will continue liaising with the Department of Environment and Local Government on this matter, and will update the website accordingly.

22. Will there be enough pre-school places to meet demand?

The Budget 2016 measure to provide free pre-school to every child from age 3 is expected to increase the number of children benefiting from around 67,000 to around 127,000. However, it's important to understand that the number of children eligible will build up over time, with maximum participation not occurring until April 2017.

Enrolment	Number of children
September 2016	89,510
January 2017	22,223
April 2017	15,444
Total	127,178

In order to provide the sector with the time to expand provision to meet demand, the decision was made to implement the measure from September 2016 – providing time for all involved to work together to ensure children get to benefit from this increased investment in quality pre-school.

Currently, there are about 10,000 vacant pre-school places around the country; a further approximately 13,000 places will need to be available by September 2016. Budget 2016 also provided for a further Learner Fund to support staff in upgrading their qualifications so that there will be sufficient trained staff available to provide a high quality pre-school service for all children. What are the implications for pre-school providers of the Budget 2016 changes?

The biggest increase in children becoming eligible for free pre-school will be in September 2016, and services have nearly a year to plan for that increase in demand. At that stage, some pre-school providers will find that all of their spare capacity has been filled. Pre-school providers will then have the opportunity to assess the level of demand for free pre-school places in January and April, and to make plans to provide additional free pre-school sessions – increasing the hours of existing staff, or recruiting extra staff, in order to expand capacity to meet the additional demand. Some providers may determine that it is now worthwhile to seek planning permission to expand their premises and grow their business. It will be up to each provider to decide how best to respond to this significant increase in Government investment in free pre-school.

23. Which children should I prioritise for a free pre-school place, the children who are with me now and who wish to stay another year, or the children whose names were on the waiting list for September 2016?

If the service cannot or does not wish to expand capacity, it will be up to the pre-school provider to decide which children should be given priority. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs plans to ensure that information will be made available to parents regarding other pre-school services available in the area.

24. NEW! Where I cannot run two years of the free pre-school programme for the same child, can I still offer a place in my other pre-school room to fee paying parents over children eligible for free pre-school?

If your service only runs one free pre-school session/room and it is full then parents have the option to go to another service where they can avail of the free pre-school or if they wish they can choose to pay to keep their child in the service of their choice.

25. NEW! Can I run two free pre-school sessions but with one not running for the full 15 hours (38 week model) or 14 hours (41 week model)

No. To be compliant with the contract rules for the free pre-school programme, pre-school providers must be available to provide the full free pre-school programme i.e. 3 hours per day x 5 days per week.

26. The capitation rates paid to pre-school providers were reduced in September 2012; what will the rates be in September 2016 when free pre-school is delivered?

In line with the expansion of free pre-school, capitation rates paid to providers will be fully restored:

- The standard capitation rate will increase from €62.50 to €64.50 per child, per week. The standard rate is paid where all staff working with children in the service are qualified to at least level 5 (or equivalent) on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ), and where the pre-school leader is qualified to at least NFQ level 6 (or equivalent);
- The higher capitation rate will increase from €73 to €75 per child, per week. The higher rate is paid where all pre-school assistants in the service are qualified to at least level 5 on the NFQ, and where the pre-school leader is qualified to at least NFQ level 7 (or equivalent), as recognised by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

More information on the Higher Capitation and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs Early Years Recognised Qualifications is available at www.dcy.a.ie

27. Will child: staff ratios change with the increase in capitation rates?

There will be no change to the child: staff ratio, which will remain at 1:11¹.

28. NEW! My service receives higher capitation based on having a room leader(s) with a minimum Level 7 qualification in the free pre-school room(s). I now have children in another room who are eligible for free pre-school but do not have a room leader with a minimum Level 7 qualification in that room. Will my service lose the higher capitation if I register these children for free pre-school?

While the current rules in relation to higher capitation continue to apply, this issue is being given active consideration. While it is recognised that there may be challenges in securing staff qualified to Level 7 (or equivalent) in all pre-school rooms, the aim of the significant Government investment in free pre-school is to ensure that children have access to the best quality care and education in their early years.

In the context of the Budget 2016 announcement, and the efforts being made by the pre-school sector to provide sufficient additional capacity, some leniency will be given during compliance visits (for this programme year only), to pre-school providers in receipt of higher capitation that can prove that a fully qualified room leader with a minimum Level 7 qualification (or equivalent) has been recruited, but who has not been able to start immediately due to any delays experienced with Garda vetting.

The higher capitation rules will be considered further for the 2016/17 programme year when the new eligibility comes into force.

¹ The child:staff ratio was reduced from 10:1 to 11:1 in September 2012 when capitation rates were reduced.

29. NEW! I have children with a disability enrolled in the free pre-school programme, when can I expect support for these children?

From September 2016, a new model - 'Supporting Access to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability' – will be in place. This model, which will provide for the inclusion of children with a disability in the free pre-school programme, was launched on the 18th of November 2015 by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs Dr. James Reilly, along with the Minister for Education and Skills Jan O'Sullivan and Kathleen Lynch, Minister of State from the Department of Health whose responsibilities include the area of disability.

The model of supports launched include: enhanced continuing professional development for early years practitioners; grants for equipment, appliances and minor alterations, increased capitation for certain children with very complex needs, as well as access to therapeutic intervention.

Further details on these supports will be available in early 2016.