

## **SURVEY ON OVERAGE EXEMPTIONS FOR THE EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE AND EDUCATION (ECCE) PROGRAMME**

### **Background**

Free pre-school, which is provided under the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, was introduced by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) in 2010. The objective of this Programme is to make early learning in a formal setting available to eligible children before they commence primary school. When first introduced, the ECCE Programme was delivered over 38 weeks in a given ECCE Programme Year and children were required to be between the ages of 3 years and 2 months and 4 years and 7 months on September 1st in the year they enrolled. The general pattern of enrolment and attendance was 3 hours per day, five days per weeks over the 38 week Programme Year.

For some children with a disability, this pattern of attendance and enrolment was not feasible, due largely to inadequate supports in the pre-school to ensure the child could be included and meaningfully participate in the Programme. To address this issue, an allowance was made to enable these children split the entitlement to free pre-school education over 2 Programme Years. For example, a child may have availed of 3 days of free pre-school education in year one and 2 days in year two – with the full entitlement to free pre-school education remaining at 38 weeks.

In order to facilitate the cases where the child would have been over the upper age limit for the ECCE Programme (i.e. 4 years 7 months), an exemption to this upper age limit was introduced. This flexibility was never intended to conflict with the legislative requirement to start school by age six.

These arrangements were introduced within a context where:

- The ECCE Programme only operated for a 38 week period, or one programme year; and
- Where pre-school supports for children with a disability were ad hoc and inadequate.

The ECCE Programme was extended in 2016/17 and, in line with a Programme for Government commitment, the Programme will be extended further to two full years from September 2018. From this date, children can enrol for two years of the ECCE Programme in September of a given programme year when they are between the ages of 2 years 8 months to 3 years 7 months, and, provided they avail of the maximum entitlement to the ECCE Programme, these children will transition to primary school between the ages of 4 years 8 months and 5 years 7 months.

In addition, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) was introduced in June 2016. AIM is a child-centred model, involving seven levels of progressive support to enable the full inclusion and meaningful participation of children with a disability in the ECCE Programme.

In light of these significant developments and improvements to the ECCE Programme, the DCYA, with the support of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), took the decision to abolish the overage exemption for children with a disability attending the ECCE Programme from September 2018.

This decision was in keeping with the best interest principle with regard to a child's participation in pre-school and primary school as follows:

- children should participate in inclusive mainstream settings (both pre-school and primary) (unless there is a compelling argument for a specialist setting), and
- children should transition from pre-school to primary school with their peers with appropriate supports provided by the relevant primary school, the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and other bodies as required.

The announcement of changes with regard to the overage exemption was designed to support the achievement of better outcomes for children with disabilities. However, the announcement was met by objections from a number of parents who expressed concerns at the move.

In light of concerns expressed, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs decided to temporarily suspend the abolition of the overage exemption and together with the Minister for Education and Skills agreed to carry out a consultation process on this issue with parents of children with disabilities and others.

This consultation process, which is being carried out by the National Disability Authority (NDA) on behalf of both Departments, involves a review of evidence and significant stakeholder engagement with a view to producing a final report at the end of June 2018.