

Welcome to your Early Years e-Bulletin

I am really pleased to share the first Early Years e-Bulletin of 2025 in my new role as Minister for Children, Disability and Equality.

I was honoured to be appointed to this role by the Taoiseach, given hugely important work that is being led by this Department more broadly, and by the Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Division in particular.

The contribution early learning and care, schoolage childcare and childminding make in the lives of children and their families every day and the centrality of this sector for the functioning of society and the economy is firmly acknowledged.



That is why, building on substantial increases in State investment in recent years and on the significant progress made in improving affordability, accessibility,

availability and quality of early learning and care and school-age childcare, the new Programme for Government has clearly signalled Government's commitment to further growth in State investment in this sector and to continued reform over its term in order to make further progress in:

- reducing out of pocket costs of early learning and care and school-age childcare for families;
- ensuring that children from all backgrounds in particular children a disability and children experiencing disadvantage - can access and participate in high quality early learning and care and school-age childcare.
- ensuring the supply of early learning and care and school-age childcare places meets demand;
- increasing the pay and improving the working conditions of early years
 educators and school-age childcare practitioners; and
- improving the quality of children's early learning experiences.

I very much look forward to working with you all and the many stakeholders involved in, and impacted by, the vital work of this sector, in planning the way forward to deliver on the important and ambitious mandate I have been given.

Best wishes,

Norma Foley TD

Minister for Children, Disability and Equality



National Child Safeguarding Programme

The National Child Safeguarding Programme website has been updated to support Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC/SAC) services to

implement robust child safeguarding policies, procedures and practices. On the website, you will find supports and resources including information on training, info blasts on important safeguarding topics and the Child Safeguarding Resource Document



which will support you with the development and implementation of your Child Safeguarding Statement, policies and procedures.

The website includes sector specific information for parents, ELC and SAC services and Childminding services along with downloadable posters, templates and other resources that will support you to protect children from harm, promote their welfare and create an environment which allows children to grow, develop and achieve their full potential. Please see www.childsafeguardingelc.ie for more information

Garda Vetting – Reminder about Changes in Garda Vetting Procedures

Garda Vetting plays a necessary and vital role in the safeguarding of children within the ELC and SAC sector. Up to now, vetting services have been carried out by Barnardos and also Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) for their members.

We would like to remind you of important changes to the Garda Vetting procedure for the ELC and SAC sector. These changes have been designed to streamline the process and continue safeguarding our nation's children. These updates will affect how employers, childminders, and employees apply for or renew their Garda Vetting applications.

What's Changed?

Starting from 1 February 2025, the following changes have taken effect:

- Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) manage Garda Vetting services for all employees in ELC and SAC services. You do not need to be a member of Early Childhood Ireland to access this free vetting service. You will, however, need to register with Early Childhood Ireland as a Garda Vetting User to access vetting services click here for further information.
- Tusla manage Garda Vetting services for registered providers, including childminders, as well as Chairpersons of Boards of Management – <u>click here</u> for further information.
- As part of these changes, Barnardos no longer provide vetting services.

There is no need to reapply for Garda vetting if your current vetting is still valid (dated within the last three years). The recent changes only affect the process of where you apply for Garda vetting – for employees and for registered providers, or Chairpersons of Boards of Management (if they are the registered provider). If your Garda Vetting is dated within the last three years, it remains valid, unless there has been a change in your employment status.

For vetting of employees:

- If your current provider is Barnardos and you have employees, you will be
 required to apply for a new Garda Vetting Affiliate Number for Early Childhood
 Ireland. We recommend that you take a proactive approach in transferring to
 your new provider to be ready in advance of when you might next need Garda
 vetting services. This is a free service.
- Please contact the Garda National Vetting Bureau (GNBV) at <u>gnvb.registration@garda.ie</u> to progress your Affiliate Number application to ensure you have your new number to process submissions through Early Childhood Ireland.
- Please note that the process of obtaining a new affiliate number can take several weeks and you will have no access to Garda vetting services during this period. It is therefore important that you should only instigate a change in

affiliate number when you have no vetting applications in progress and do not anticipate you will need vetting.



For vetting of registered providers including childminders, single-handed operators and Chairpersons of Boards of Management.

- Tusla will manage Garda Vetting services for registered providers including childminders, single-handed operators, and Chairpersons of Boards of Management.
- This vetting service is available to all childminders, including those who are not yet registered.
- An affiliate number will not be required to access vetting through Tusla as they are a Regulatory Body.

For further information please visit the Gov.ie page with information on the new Garda Vetting procedures for the sector here. This page will be updated regularly with any further details or guidance.

We are committed to supporting you throughout this transition period. These changes are in effect since 1 February 2025. At all times, it is vital that your vetting compliance and legal obligations are maintained.

The Department would like to acknowledge and thank Barnardos for their important contribution, since 2007, in supporting the safeguarding of children by carrying out Garda Vetting for the sector.

Should you have any questions, please feel free to reach out to your current provider or contact your local City or County Childcare Committee.

Save the date – National Conference: Aistear (2024), the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework

On Saturday, 24 May the Department and National Council for Curriculum Assessment are hosting a national conference in Dublin focussing on the updated Aistear which was published in December 2024. The conference will celebrate current inspirational practice and explore the key changes and messages that have underpinned the update of Aistear. Further details will be shared in the coming weeks.

Childminding Development Grants for 2025 open for application

The opening of the 2025 Childminding Development Grant was announced by Minister Norma Foley on Tuesday, 4 February.

The Childminding Development Grant provides up to €1,000 to assist both registered and unregistered childminders who are providing a childminding service in their own homes. The grant aims to support childminders to enhance quality and safety in their service through the purchase of toys, childcare equipment, safety equipment, equipment to support inclusion and Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Maths (STEAM) education, as well as IT equipment to assist childminders to engage with training and registration processes.



The grant scheme is open to all childminders, including those who are planning to open a childminding business during 2025. 75% of the grant is paid in advance to help childminders with the upfront costs of purchasing equipment.

The total budget of €500,000 reflects the high demand for the grant in previous years. It also reflects the Government's commitment to support childminders to

prepare for registration with Tusla. In line with the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028, regulations written specifically for childminders came into effect for the first time in September 2024, making it possible for all childminders to register with Tusla and take part in the National Childcare Scheme (NCS).

Those childminders who were previously exempt from regulation have a three-year transition period until 2027 during which they are now able to register with Tusla but are not yet required to do so.

For further information about the Childminding Development Grant or the National Action Plan for Childminding 2021-2028, visit www.gov.ie/childminding or contact your local City or County Childcare Committee.

Applications for the 2025 Childminding Development Grant opened on Tuesday, 4 February and will close on Friday, 4 April.



Core Funding Financial Reporting

As you are aware, the deadline for Core Funding Partner Services to submit their Income and Expenditure Template for programme year 2 is 28 February 2025.

There is some additional information available on the <u>Hive</u>, under the Core Funding Reporting Year 2 (2023/2024) tab, including the updated list of nominal codes, an FAQ and a Guidance Note for Core Funding Financial Reporting requirements.

The online submission portal, CFCRRS.ie, is now open. A sample Income and Expenditure template is available to download from the Hive.







Nurturing Skills Learner Fund (NSLF) Update

The NSLF will continue in pilot phase in 2025 for educators seeking to upskill for the academic year 2025/2026 commencing autumn 2025. Further information on the NSLF application date will be available on the NSLF website soon and will be published in the Early Years Bulletin.

The NSLF for the academic year 2024/2025 was introduced on a pilot basis for staff working in the ELC and SAC sector with a current signed Core Funding contract with the Department.

Details of the pilot NSLF and the rules for pilot scheme can be viewed on the NSLF website at: http://www.gov.ie/NurturingSkillsLearnerFund.



Eligibility

Those wishing to make an application must meet the following eligibility criteria for the NSLF:

- be working with children in a Tusla-registered Early Learning and Care (ELC)
 or School Age Childcare (SAC) service,
- the service in which the applicant is working in, must have a current signed
 Core Funding contract with the Department.
- Applicants must have worked within an ELC or SAC service for the six months prior to their application.
- Applicants must have a current application/offer for 2025/26 entry to a Level
 7/8 Degree course approved by the Qualification Advisory Board (QAB) that is eligible for NSLF.
- be a new entrant to an Approved Course for the academic year commencing 2025/2026 (Autumn 2025)
- not be an ELC educator or SAC practitioner currently undertaking the completion of an Approved Course or an equivalent degree; and
- not be an ELC educator or SAC practitioner who has already completed an Approved Course or equivalent degree.
- For clarity purposes, at time of application an applicant must not hold (or be undertaking) an Approved Course at level 7 or level 8 in Early Learning and Care.

Where the demand for funding is greater than the available budget, the selection of successful applicants is based on the following criteria as set out in the Scheme rules:

- 1. The number of graduates in the applicant's service, with priority for applicants from services with no graduates,
- 2. Priority index (Equal Start Designation), with priority for applicants from services supporting the most disadvantaged children
- **3.** The role of the applicant in a service, with priority for those in lead educator or manager roles.

4. If, after the above prioritisation has been applied and not been decisive, random selection was applied.



During the pilot phase, the number of successful NSLF applicants is limited by the available funding. For the academic year 2024/2025 just over 600 applications were completed and verified as meeting the criteria for the pilot NSLF. 350 applicants were successful and will receive NSLF funding for the academic year 2024/2025. 304 of the 350 successful applicants were from a service with no graduate. For the coming years, NSLF has secured co-funding under the Irish Government's Employment, Inclusion Skills and Training (EIST) scheme and the European Commission's European Social Fund + (ESF+)."

New research on the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities

The Department is pleased to announce the completion of a research project into the ELC and SAC needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities.

This research stems from an objective in the First 5 Implementation Plan (2019) to 'undertake research on the ELC and SAC needs of parents who work atypical hours or live in rural communities and develop recommendations for further actions'. Completion of this research was also a commitment in the Department of Rural and Community Development's (DRCD) Our Rural Future: Rural Development Policy, 2021-2025.



The findings from this research suggest broadly similar experiences and high rates of satisfaction among parents with their ELC and SAC arrangements. However, parents in the study who work atypical hours or live in rural communities highlighted specific issues that they faced accessing ELC and SAC, particularly centre-based care, due to the location and operating hours of existing providers. The results indicated higher usage of parent/caregiver or familial care among parents working

atypical hours and limited availability of ELC and SAC, particularly for those who live rurally and work atypical hours. Overall, the findings suggest a potential compounding of issues for families who live rurally and also work atypical hours.

The findings from this project provide valuable insights into parents' ELC and SAC experiences and will be used to inform the development and implementation of future policy.

Libraries Ireland

Ireland Reads is back for February 2025!

Irish libraries, Children's Books Ireland, Age Friendly Ireland, Adult Literacy for Life, NALA, and others are partnering once again to get the whole country reading this month in the lead up to Ireland Reads Day on Saturday, 22 February.

We are asking everyone to 'Get lost in a good book' during February or on Ireland Reads Day itself, February 22 – whether that's reading a book, a newspaper, a comic – whatever works grabs your interest!

We would love if everyone in early learning and childcare - educators, children and parents -



would get involved and spread the word!

Here's how you can get involved

Visit www.irelandreads.ie, where you can:

Get some reading inspiration – simply enter the type of book you like best, how long you have available to read each day and the website will suggest a book and tell you how long it will take to read it.

Visit your library during February or on Ireland Reads Day

All over the country, libraries will be holding events and activities in support of Ireland Reads.

Libraries have lots planned for all ages during February and on Saturday, February 22 for Ireland Reads Day.

Check <u>IrelandReads.ie</u> or your library website for details of what's happening near you!



Grab your Ireland Reads read!

Library members can borrow from 13 million items or download from thousands of eBooks, audiobooks, magazines and newspapers online. Simply visit www.librariesireland.ie to join.

You can browse and borrow in your local library or browse and reserve online. Libraries also have thousands of ebooks, audiobooks and online newspapers and magazines available to download straight to your device.

Please also consider supporting your local bookshop.

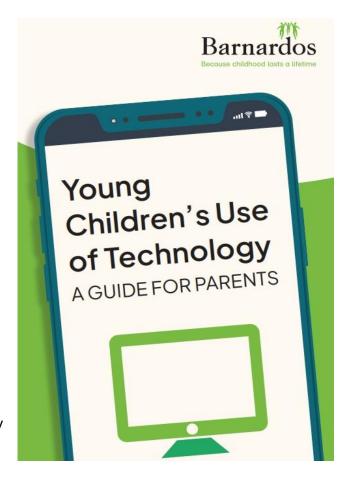
Thank you for helping to get Ireland Reading!

Young Children's Use of Technology – A Guide for Parents

Barnardos has launched a great new resource for parents, 'Young Children's Use of Technology, A Guide for Parents'.

This new guide for parents looks at the ways young children, aged up to six years, use technology and considers the potential impacts this might have on their wellbeing and their development – both good and bad.

It offers tips and guidance on how parents can make the best decisions around their child's use of technology in an informed way to ensure that they are safe, healthy, and happy.



The guide parents is available to download for free online here.

Get SunSmart! Children's Art Competition 2025

The HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) in collaboration with Healthy Ireland are running a children's art competition. They are calling on all preschool and primary school children, depending on their age category to either colourin the SunSmart picture or draw a picture showing how to be SunSmart!



This campaign encourages children to be creative and learn how to enjoy the sun safely. For children in pre-school and Junior Infants to First Class, they can colour in the Healthy Ireland SunSmart 5S's picture. For children in Second to Fourth Class, and Fifth and Sixth Class, they can draw a picture showing how to be SunSmart using the Healthy Ireland SunSmart 5S's.

Full details of the competition are available at www.gov.ie/getsunsmart.

The overall winners of each category will:

- Have their artwork featured as part of the 2025 SunSmart Campaign
- An OPW Family Heritage Card. Step into the story with a Family Heritage
 Card. Enjoy FREE admission for 12 months for 2 Adults and 3 Children into
 all fee-paying OPW managed sites. Visit <u>Heritage Ireland</u> for more
 information.
- A family day pass for Dublin Zoo for 2 adults and up to 4 children.

AND a National Book Token worth €20!

There will also be 10 lucky runner-up prizes in each of the four category who will receive a Healthy Ireland SunSmart goodie bag.

How to enter

The competition is open to all pre-school and primary school children. There are 4 categories:

Category 1: Pre-school / Category 2: Junior Infants to First Class – Download, print and colour in the Healthy Ireland SunSmart 5S's images.

• Click here for application form.

Category 3: Second Class to Fourth Class / Category 4: Fifth and Sixth Class – Download, print and draw a picture of how to be SunSmart using the Healthy Ireland SunSmart 5S's. You can draw how to be SunSmart using crayons, pencils, pens, colouring pencils, markers or paint on the space below or on a plain white paper. If using a plain white paper, make sure to include the details at the bottom of the form.

- Click here for application form for second to fourth class.
- Click here for application form for fifth and sixth class

Children can post their picture to Healthy Ireland SunSmart, NCCP Cancer Prevention Function, National Cancer Control Programme, King's Inns House, 200 Parnell Street, Dublin 1, DO1 A3Y8, or

Ask a parent, guardian, or teacher to take a photo of their picture and email it to healthyireland@health.gov.ie by **5pm on 28 March**. Full details of the competition including terms and conditions are at www.gov.ie/getsunsmart.



Publication of the

Department of Education Inspectorate Report (2021-2023) and Thematic Review

The Department of Education Inspectorate Report (2021-2023) and Thematic Review was published in December 2024. The full report is available at this link gov.ie - The Department of Education Inspectorate Report (2021 - 2023) and Thematic Review

Three chapters relate specifically to early learning and care (ELC) settings.

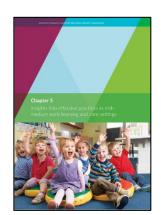




Chapter 2, *Early Years Insights*, acknowledges that the landscape of early learning and care provision in Ireland continued to develop between 2020 and 2023 with policy developments, programme expansions and ongoing quality-based initiatives. The chapter shows that the sector is making significant strides in providing high-quality early learning experiences for children, with ELC settings demonstrating commitment to inclusive practices, fostering belonging, creating

stimulating learning environments and implementing childcentred, play-based curricula. The chapter also highlights some areas for improvement in generating cultural and community connections, supporting early language learning and developing leadership capacity.

Chapter 5, Insights into effective practices in Irish-medium early learning and care settings, provides insights from Department of Education inspection reports published from 2016-2023. The



chapter shares exemplars of practice from Irish-medium ELC settings in Gaeltacht and non-Gaeltacht areas. It highlights strengths in provision and areas for further development.



Chapter 10, Supporting children with the transition from home or early learning and care settings to primary school, looks specifically at children's transition to primary school. A positive transition experience can have long-lasting effects on children's socio-emotional, behavioural and cognitive outcomes. Informed by inspections in primary schools and discussions with ELC settings, the chapter highlights the importance of effective communication, curriculum continuity and strong support

systems to help children in meeting the challenges that may arise in transitions from one educational setting to another. The chapter spotlights exemplars of effective practice and makes recommendations for improvement for school leaders, junior-infant teachers, stakeholders and government departments.

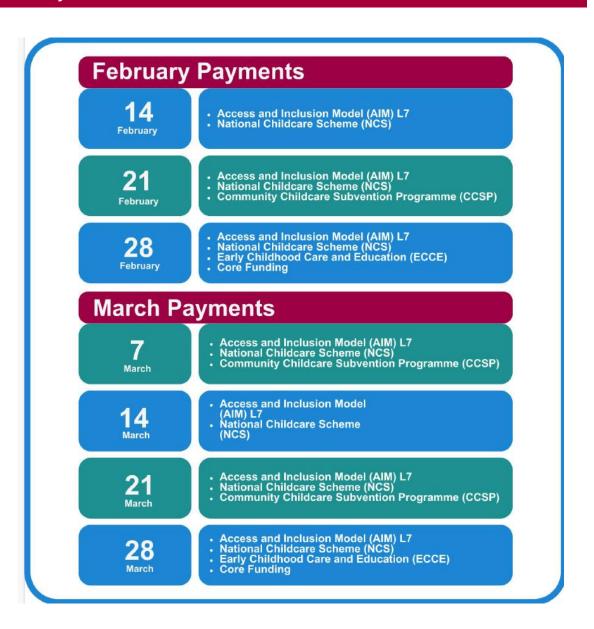


government supporting communities

We are delighted to be able to bring you the latest updates from Pobal Early Years and keep you informed on what's happening.

See below for all the latest highlights.

1. Payments



2. NCS Service Calendar Reminder - how to add closures to your service

With the various breaks coming up for February mid-term, and Easter, below is a reminder of how to add closures to your service.

If you are closed over February mid-term break, please following these steps:

- Mark the closures on your NCS service calendar on the Early Years Hive
- Please do this before the February mid-term period -NCS calendars cannot be changed retrospectively
- Please note if the closure is a subsidised (paid) closure or not.
- Services are entitled to up to 10 subsidised closures per programme year.

For help on adding closures to your NCS service calendar, see the 'How to add a Closure' heading of the NCS Service Calendar Guide on the Early Years Hive.

3. Early Year Hive - New Feature for Important Notifications

We have a new feature on the Early Years Hive. An 'Important notification' banner will display urgent messages to providers, such as scheduled maintenance, application deadlines, Force Majeure reminders, etc.

The image below shows how it looks on the Early Years Hive.



This function was added in response to feedback from providers who completed the Early Years Provider Centre Customer Survey. Please continue to share your feedback if selected for this survey.



There is no change to the Announcement page, please go there to check for detailed information.

4. Upcoming training

Nurturing Skills Learner Fund (NSLF) programme readiness training for providers and prospective students will take place in the coming weeks.

Watch out for a new quarterly rolling Early Years Hive tutorial. It will help providers with portal tasks and navigation.

Keep an eye on 'Announcements' page of the Early Years Hive for training invites and information.

5. Stakeholder Engagement Service Visits

Throughout 2024 ,we engaged with and listened to the experiences of ELC and SAC providers.

They have proved very rewarding and are a great way of reaching out to the services Pobal works alongside.

They give us more opportunities to listen and learn from the experts in the sector. We look forward to more of these in 2025.







6. Better Start



Quality Development Service

What areas of practice would you like to strengthen for children in your setting? The Quality Development Service offers practice advice mentoring that focuses on children's learning and development and is tailored to

your setting.



If you are interested in availing of practice advice and mentoring from an Early Years Specialist, you can apply directly through the Early Years Hive. To find out more about the Quality Development Service, the range of services it offers and how to apply <u>Click Here</u>.

Expansion of the Access and Inclusion Model

The expansion of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is up and running since September 2024. It enables children with additional needs to be supported and participate in Early Learning and Care settings, beyond the time spent in the ECCE programme, in and out of term. Settings can apply for up to an additional 3 hours of support per



dayduring ECCE term time. They can also apply for an additional 6 hours of support a day during non-term times.

Please refer to the <u>AIM Hive Guides</u> to support you with the submission of your AIM Standard, AIM Plus and AIM Non-term applications.

Transitions

As you plan to support transitions to primary school, check out the Transition Pillar in the Aistear, Síolta Practice Guide for resource ideas. Useful templates for documenting your planning can be found on the Mó Sceal website here!

'My Inclusion' plan will help you to document the voice of the child and plan for their transition to school. Download a copy of the plan here!

Learning and Development

Seachtaine na Gaeilge (1 to 17 March) is a festival celebrating Irish culture and language. To find out more and start planning events for your setting click here!

Lámh Module One on-line course will continue over the coming months. Watch out for course dates on the Better Start website here!



Watch out for course dates on the Better Start website here!





EARLY YEARS INSPECTORATE

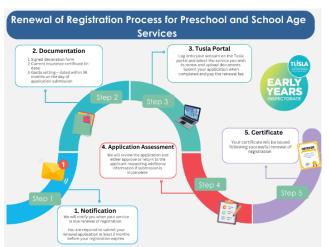
From 1 February 2025 Tusla will commence providing the Garda Vetting Application Service for anyone who is a Registered Provider of an early years' service (under part VIIA of the Child Care Act 1991, as amended) or anyone who is planning to submit an application to become a Registered Provider. This includes:

- Registered Providers of pre-school services.
- Registered Providers of school-age services.
- Childminders.
- Chairpersons of Boards of management for pre-school and school-age services where the person is the Registered Provider.

We are not providing a Garda Vetting Application Service for anyone who is not registered or not intending to register as a Registered Provider. You can find more information on the new Garda Vetting section of our website.

Registration Renewal

2025 Registration Renewal - January 2025



The 2025 Registration Renewal Cycle begins in March 2025 and will cover 4,315 Pre-School and School-Age Services.

To prepare, please check your service's registration status and update any required documentation in advance.

You can find your registration date on your current certificate or via the registers:

Pre-School Services: Link

School Age Services: Link

Required documents:

- 1. Signed declaration form.
- 2. Current, valid insurance certificate.

3. Garda vetting for the Registered Provider and Person in Charge (PIC), dated within 36 months of submission. For corporate bodies, garda vetting is also needed for all directors.

You will receive a notification two months before your renewal date to upload documents and pay the renewal fee. More details will follow soon. For additional information, visit this <u>link</u>.

Childminding

ChildmindingServices



On 30 September 2024, the Early Years Inspectorate launched a new system for processing applications for the registration of childminders, in accordance with the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Childminding Services) Regulations 2024.

We have published <u>several new resources</u> to support childminders and prospective childminders with the regulatory process. Resources include bite-size videos and guidance documents.

Guidance Documents and Videos	
Childminding Applications	
Guidance Documents	Supporting Videos
Guide to the Tusla portal for Childminders Guide to Registration application for Childminders	 Setting up an account on the Tusla Portal Getting started with your childminding application Completing the online application on the Tusla Portal
Pre-Registration Assessment	
Guidance Documents	Supporting Videos
Guide to Pre-Registration Assessments for Childminders Corrective Action Process for Childminding Services. Safe sleep for babies and children Guidance for Childminders A Guide to Assessment Findings Review for Childminders	 Pre-Registration Assessment Childminding Home Visit Corrective Action Process Assessment Findings Review Process

A number of applications have now been received and several childminders have now successfully been registered under the new regulations. We have established a feedback survey to enable childminders to tell us how they found the process and the ICT system supporting it.

If you have questions about childminding regulations, our <u>Childminder Frequently Asked Questions</u> page can provide further assistance. If you cannot find the answer to your question there you can contact the Childminder helpline.

Childminding Advice & Information

For information about the regulation of childminding, please have a look at the extensive

Childminder Frequently Asked Questions on our website

If you can't find the answer to your question in the FAQs you can contact our Childminding helpline, either via email - cm.registration@tusla.ie or on (061) 440600 (option 9)