



**Subject:**

**Updated Guidance on 'Amalgamation for Standardisation' of Pre-School Classes**

**Circular Number:**

2024/11

**Date of Issue:** 23/7/2024

**Target Audience:**

- Principals and Boards of Governors of all Grant-Aided Nursery Schools; Grant-Aided Primary Schools with Nursery Provision;
- Education Authority (EA);
- Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS);
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG);
- Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education (NICIE);
- Controlled Schools' Support Council (CSSC);
- Governing Bodies Association (GBA);
- Trustees;
- Catholic Schools' Trustee Service (CSTS);
- Transferor Representatives' Council (TRC).

**Enquiries:**

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**Governor Awareness:**

Essential

**Status of Contents:**

Advice for Principals and Boards of Governors, for action by Education Authority

**Related Documents:**

DE Circular: 2017/09 – 07 July 2017 – Guidance on the Publication of a Development Proposal (Replacement for Circular DE 2014/21)  
DE Circular 2022/09 – Amalgamation for Standardisation

DE Circular: 2018/16 – Open Enrolment In Nursery Schools And Nursery Classes In Primary Schools

Department of Education-  
[Area Planning Guidance - 27 September 2016.](#)

**Expiry Date:**

Not applicable

**DE Website:**

[Education-ni.gov.uk](http://Education-ni.gov.uk)

## 1 Purpose of the Circular

1.1 The purpose of this circular is to provide an update to the guidance on the “Amalgamation for Standardisation” process set out in Circular 2022/09 following its successful pilot.

1.2 The “Amalgamation for Standardisation” process provides a streamlined mechanism to approve changes to a grant-aided school’s approved numbers and session length which may not require a Development Proposal (DP). The process is designed to facilitate change where there is evidence demonstrating an historical pattern of over provision within the setting and sufficient capacity in the surrounding area to continue to provide a funded pre-school education place for every target-aged child whose parents want it. This circular should be read in conjunction with Circular 2022/09 which provides further detail and background.

## 2 Update on Pre-School Standardisation

2.1 The Minister of Education has determined that funded pre-school education provision should be standardised to offer at least 22.5 hours education per week in the year before compulsory education. The intention was first indicated in **Learning to Learn (2013)** and is in line with the **Fair Start** action that “DE should standardise the length of pre-school education day to at least 4.5 hours per day, including access to free school meals for eligible children, thereby improving equality of provision”, the **New Decade New Approach (NDNA)** commitment that “the Executive will publish a Childcare Strategy and will give immediate priority to developing arrangements to deliver extended, affordable, responsive, high quality provision of early education and care initiatives for families with children aged 3-4” and the relevant action in the **Independent Review of Education Report** that “there should be phased expansion of early years education. First steps should ensure that all... 3-year-olds [receive] up to 22.5 hours per week.”

2.2 On 23 May 2024, the Minister announced a £25million package of measures to support children, parents and providers with early learning and childcare in 2024/25, including the commencement of a programme to standardise all funded pre-school education provision to offer all children 22.5 hours pre-school

education per week. The standardisation of funded pre-school education provision will be subject to Executive approval and funding at each stage.

2.3 The **‘Amalgamation for Standardisation’ pilot** set out in Circular 2022/09 provided an important opportunity to trial transformation to a longer session length in some settings to help inform wider decisions and planning for a standardised pre-school session length. Following successful evaluation, it has been determined that the processes developed during the pilot should continue to apply during the implementation of standardised pre-school session lengths.

### 3 **What is ‘Amalgamation for Standardisation’?**

3.1 The **‘Amalgamation for Standardisation’** process will facilitate the approval of decreases to a statutory pre-school’s approved numbers and a change of session length from part time to full time which reflect an established trend of over provision in the setting. The aim and objective is to better match the supply of funded pre-school education places to the level and pattern of demand, taking into account the agreed policy direction of pre-school education provision in terms of standardising session length, reducing over provision, minimising the administrative burden and creating capacity for all concerned to focus on more strategic matters.

3.2 Every funded pre-school education provider is an important part of the network of settings that make up the education system which caters for the needs and aspirations of all children and parents in an area. Any change to an existing pre-school provider must therefore be considered in the wider context of provision in the area.

3.3 **‘Amalgamation for Standardisation’** involves looking at a statutory pre-school’s current and historical pattern of enrolment; and gathering and analysing evidence from the pre-schools concerned and other pre-schools in the wider area, to determine how its enrolment numbers should be treated in accordance with existing legislative frameworks.

#### 4 **Process for ‘Amalgamation for Standardisation’**

4.1 The Department will identify statutory pre-schools that have had high admissions and enrolment numbers of underage (penultimate pre-school age) pupils from school census data. **Statutory pre-schools will only be identified if their actual enrolment of underage pupils has been 10 or more in at least two of the last five years published census figures.**

4.2 For **‘Amalgamation for Standardisation’** to be approved, the proposed change must be deliverable within the existing provision available in the statutory pre-school setting. The EA may provide support and investment to assist a school to prepare for the proposed change as part of the PSEP standardisation programme, but requests dependent on capital or other investment that are not yet fully secured cannot be approved. As schools will have different individual states of readiness, this will mean that some schools will not be in a position to have an amalgamation request approved for some time. The EA will advise DE on schools suitable to progress at each stage.

4.3 The EA will consider the provision in the area of identified schools and determine those where provision in the surrounding area would be sufficient to meet the assessed level of demand for places for target aged pre-school children if **‘Amalgamation for Standardisation’** were applied.

4.4 The Department will publish a list of schools that have requested a change under the process and consult with relevant stakeholders including pre-school settings; planning and managing authorities; and sectoral support bodies on the proposed change.

4.5 The purpose of the consultation is to advise of the proposed decrease and change of session length, to identify any implications arising from it and to give an opportunity to consultees to express their views which will then be used to inform the Minister's decision. This will enable these stakeholders to put forward their views and evidence as to whether the schools listed should be part of the process or not, in line with the legislative requirement at Articles 25 and Article 29 of the Education (NI) Order 1998. Those submitting their views in response to

the consultation must ensure that evidence is provided to substantiate the views and comments being expressed. It is considered that **one month** should be sufficient for responses to be provided.

4.6 The Department will examine all evidence and information received and consider which appropriate legislative framework should be followed; i.e. whether the approved decrease and session change should be administered by Articles 25 and Article 29 of the Education (NI) Order 1998, or via a DP.

4.7 In each case, advice will be provided to the Minister to decide if the proposed changes can be considered under the '**Amalgamation for Standardisation**' process. The Minister will consider each case in the context of Departmental policies, statutory duties and the wider context of the network of schools that exist.

4.8 Should the Minister decide to approve a change via '**Amalgamation for Standardisation**' for a statutory pre-school, approval will be processed under Articles 25 and Article 29 of the Education (NI) Order 1998.

4.9 For those changes which are considered to be significant and therefore requiring a DP, the Department will liaise with the relevant planning authority and/or Board of Governors about the need to employ the DP process. This will be dependent on Ministerial priorities and the need for funded pre-school places in the wider area.

## **5 Implementation**

5.1 Changes approved via the "**Amalgamation for Standardisation**" process should be implemented as soon as possible, with the intention that first approved changes will be in effect by **September 2025**.

5.2 The process will be reviewed in due course and following review may be amended, withdrawn or extended.

5.3 Statutory pre-schools which meet the necessary criteria will be contacted and notified by the Department. As schools will have different individual states of readiness, not all schools that meet the enrolment criterion will progress through

the process at the same time or at the same rate. The EA will advise DE on schools suitable to progress at each stage.

## PROCESS FLOWCHART FOR AMENDING A PRE-SCHOOL'S ENROLMENT NUMBER AND SESSION LENGTH

