

E: ELCPartnershipForum@gov.scot

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To all registered childcare providers and childminders

I am pleased to see that case rates in childcare settings are beginning to come down, with decreases in numbers of positive cases reported to the Care Inspectorate for both staff and children.

However, I recognise that the situation remains challenging and greatly appreciate the efforts made by you and your teams in supporting children and families during these most difficult of times. I am writing to update you on some key developments in respect of the Scottish Government's approach to managing Covid-19, which have a direct operational impact on providers.

I would particularly like to draw your attention to the **new Childcare Sector Omicron Impacts Fund**, which is offering one-off grants this financial year to registered childcare providers. This will be open from 2pm on Tuesday 8 March until the end of 17 March 2022 and further details are set out below. This letter also provides updates on the new Covid-19 Strategic Framework, the testing and vaccination communications toolkit and the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) Equality Data gathering exercise.

1. Childcare Sector Omicron Impacts Fund

Today the Scottish Government set out further details on the [Childcare Sector Omicron Impacts Fund](#), which will open for applications at 2pm on Tuesday 8 March 2022. The Scottish Government is making up to £9.8 million available through the Fund to provide one-off grants to childcare providers this financial year. These will be available to all private and third sector day care of children services and all childminding services who were registered with the Care Inspectorate on 31 December 2021. The one-off grants are being made available in recognition of the challenging circumstances in which childcare sector providers have been operating during the Omicron wave.

What level of grant support will be available?

Grant amounts will vary according to the registered size (Care Inspectorate registered places) of each service, ranging from £950 to £4,500. Grant levels across each size band are set out in the table below. Only one grant is available per registered service. Providers with multiple services can claim a grant for each of their eligible registered services.

Care Inspectorate Registered Places	Grant Amount
1-10	£950
11-25	£2,000
26-50	£3,000
51-75	£3,750
76-100	£4,200
101+	£4,500

How do I apply for a grant?

Drawing on the previous approaches to delivering targeted financial support to the childcare sector during the pandemic, the Fund is being delivered through two separate application routes (and will in effect operate as two separate funds).

Omicron Impacts Fund – Day Care of Children and Large (11 or more registered places) Childminding Services

Applications from private and third sector day care of children services, and childminding services with 11 or more registered places, will be made through the bisaccount single secure online application platform. Grant applications will then be processed by local authorities.

This is the same approach that was used to previously deliver grant support to the majority of these services through the Transitional Support Fund (in Autumn 2020) and the Temporary Restrictions Fund (in early 2021).

All eligible services will receive a link to the Fund application page ahead of it going live on 8 March, or they can access this at <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-business-funding/childcare-sector/childcare-sector-omicron-impacts-fund/>.

Omicron Impacts Fund – Childminding Services

Childminding services with a registered capacity of between 1 and 10 places are eligible for a grant of £950, and will apply through a separate secure online application platform provided by Creative Scotland. Grant applications will then be processed by the Scottish Government. This process will, to a large extent, replicate the approach used to deliver the Childminding Business Sustainability Fund in March 2021.

All childminding services with a registered capacity of 1-10 places will receive a link to the Fund application page ahead of it going live. If you have not received this information by 2pm on 8 March 2022 then please contact ELCPartnershipForum@gov.scot.

What is the deadline for submitting applications?

Eligible services can apply for a grant between 2pm on 8 March 2022 and until the end of 17 March 2022.

Further Information

More information on the Fund is available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-business-funding/childcare-sector/childcare-sector-omicron-impacts-fund/>.

If you have any questions regarding the Childcare Sector Omicron Impacts Fund then please send them to ELCPartnershipForum@gov.scot.

2. Covid-19 Strategic Framework update

On 22 February 2022 the Scottish Government published an update to [Scotland's Strategic Framework](#), setting out a new staged approach to easing protective measures to help Scotland manage and recover from the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. In this next phase the Scottish Government's approach is to manage Covid-19 primarily through public health advice, vaccination and treatment rather than legal restrictions.

The First Minister has set out that:

- current legal requirements on the use of face coverings, the collection of customer details for contact tracing purposes, and for businesses, service providers and places of worship to have regard to guidance on Covid and to take reasonably practicable measures set out in the guidance are expected to be lifted on 21 March, subject to the state of the pandemic.
- access to lateral flow and PCR tests will continue to be free of charge, ahead of a detailed transition plan being published on the future of Scotland's test and protect programme in March. We will be considering separately advice for schools and ELC settings, in line with expert input.

From now until further notice, ELC staff should follow the existing guidance for the sector alongside that which applies for the general public:

- if you have COVID symptoms, you should continue to go for a PCR test. Access to these tests remains free of charge at testing sites across the country;
- you should continue to make regular use of lateral flow tests even if you don't have symptoms, and continue to test twice weekly at home;
- the only immediate change we are making to current arrangements on lateral flow testing for the general population is in our advice on the frequency of testing. **Instead of advice to test before going anywhere to mix with others, from Monday 28 February everyone will be advised to test at least twice a week**, and in particular if you are going to a crowded place or mixing with someone who is clinically vulnerable;
- people who test positive for COVID-19 will continue to be asked to self-isolate to reduce the risk of infecting other people. Any changes to the recommended period of self-isolation will be considered on an ongoing basis.

Covid-19 guidance for ELC, school age childcare and childminding services

In line with advice from the World Health Organisation and elsewhere, one of our top priorities has been, and will remain, to keep ELC settings open and safe, and to ensure continuity of the care, education and support they provide to children, families and communities. The COVID-19 safety guidance for ELC settings, school-age childcare and childminding services is being kept under close review based on advice from the Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues, through consultation with the COVID-19 Education Recovery Group (CERG) and other stakeholder groups.

We are reviewing that guidance, and the measures set out within it, to ensure that they support a strategic move over time to managing rather than suppressing the virus, and that they support the best possible outcomes for children. Appropriate and proportionate protective measures that are aligned with those across society that reflect the current level of risk posed by the virus will continue to be required.

We are engaging with public health experts, staff, parents and representative bodies in working through what those measures should look like and to minimise the operational and educational impacts, while keeping children and staff safe.

Our intention is to have a simplified and streamlined suite of COVID-19 guidance for ELC settings, school-age childcare and childminding services to enable a more ‘normal’ ELC experience for staff, children and families as the virus becomes endemic. We will keep providers informed of updates to the guidance suite through these provider notices.

3. Testing and vaccination communications toolkit updates

We are grateful to providers and service managers for your support in sharing information about COVID-19 vaccination with staff and for giving staff time off work to get their vaccine and to recover when that it is needed. We are also grateful for your support in encouraging staff to test regularly and record their results.

On 2 February we published the [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): childcare sector toolkit](#) including materials to continue encouraging colleagues to take up the vaccine, including booster jabs, as well as regular LFD testing and reporting of results on the online portal.

To make reporting test results a little easier and quicker, we have developed a leaflet including a QR code which leads directly to the portal for reporting results. A digital copy of the leaflet has been added to the online communications toolkit, which can be printed off and distributed to staff.

Feedback from stakeholders across the childcare sector has highlighted that there continue to be concerns amongst staff about the effects of COVID vaccination when pregnant or when trying to become pregnant. We have now added COVID-19 vaccine information about pregnancy and breastfeeding from Public Health Scotland to the online communications toolkit, which includes advice on fertility. It is worth highlighting that “there is no evidence to suggest that the COVID-19 vaccine will affect fertility in women or men. If you are thinking of getting pregnant, the vaccine is the best way to protect yourself and your baby against the known risks of COVID-19 in pregnancy.”

4. Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) Equality Data

The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) is asking all registered workers to update their equality information through their MySSSC account.

By providing your up-to-date equalities information, the SSSC will get a better understanding of the diversity and unique needs of people working in this sector which will help the SSSC to meet workers’ needs, including improving how they design processes and systems and develop skills and learning resources. For more information and to update your details sign into your MySSSC account at <https://www.sssc.uk.com/mysssc-home/>

Once again, thank you for everything that you are continuing to do to support children, families and your staff at this time.



ELEANOR PASSMORE
Deputy Director, Early Learning & Childcare