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## **NICMA dismayed at start-up grant withdrawal**

***Childminders will be badly hit by withdrawal of small business grant, says NICMA***

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**The childminders' organisation, NICMA, has expressed its dismay at the withdrawal of Invest NI's start-up grant for small businesses – and warned it could further exacerbate the current shortage of childminders.**

Invest NI has confirmed to NICMA that it has withdrawn its £400 start-up grant which many new childminders were using to help meet the costs involved in setting up a childminding business.

NICMA's Director, Bridget Nodder, commented:

***"This will be a bitter blow for many prospective childminders and will only exacerbate the current shortage of registered childminders in Northern Ireland.***

***"Our feedback among members showed that many new childminders were making use of this grant in the absence of any specific start-up help for our sector.***

A recent survey of newly registered childminders, carried out by NICMA, revealed that **two-fifths (42%) had found it difficult to meet the costs**

**involved in setting up their business, with just over a quarter (26%) finding it 'very difficult.'**

In recent years there has been a sharp drop in the number of childminders in Northern Ireland; **in the four years to March 2007, there was a 19% fall in the number of registered childminders and a 20% reduction in the number of places with registered childminders.**

NICMA has been calling for a tailored package of start-up assistance specifically for childminders which would include a cash grant.

***“The news of Invest NI’s decision only makes the case for a special start-up package for childminders all the more urgent and compelling,”*** said Ms Nodder.

***“Many prospective childminders are on low incomes and find the idea of starting up their own business quite daunting.***

***“We need a specific package of help which will assist them financially, and provide them with advice and support.***

***“We hope that the Northern Ireland Executive will heed our calls and find the funding for such a package as quickly as possible.”***

NICMA’s own proposed Childminder Start-Up Package includes:

- Childminder Start-Up Grants similar to grants already available in the Republic of Ireland, and in England and Wales
- One-to-one mentoring support for childminders during the initial registration process and their first year in business

Registered childminding is by far the most popular – and affordable – form of full-time daycare in Northern Ireland; it accounts for 63% of full-time daycare places and 37% of all childcare places here.

A study commissioned by the Department for Employment and Learning concluded that there was **a significant shortfall in childcare places in Northern Ireland**, and that a 20% expansion in the number of childminders was needed to meet the demand for places.<sup>1</sup>

NICMA believes that its proposal would make a substantial contribution towards achieving growth on that scale.

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<sup>1</sup> Gray, A. and Bruegal I (2003) *The Availability, Use and Demand for Childcare Services among the Parents of Children aged 0-14 in Northern Ireland*. The study was commissioned jointly by DEL, the Equality Commission and the four Northern Ireland Childcare Partnerships.

**Editor's notes:**

1. NICMA – the Childminding Association is a charity, and is the sole organisation representing childminders in Northern Ireland. 74% of registered childminders here are members. For more details of NICMA, please go to: [www.nicma.org](http://www.nicma.org)
2. NICMA has been informed by Invest NI that the grant linked to its Start A Business programme was withdrawn on 1st April 2008 and is no longer available, except to those already registered on the programme. The grant was worth £400 for those starting full-time businesses and £200 for those starting part-time businesses. NICMA has further been told that the Start A Business programme itself is due to be replaced in September 2008 but that its replacement will not include the provision of a grant.
3. In the Republic of Ireland, Childminder Development grants of up to €630 are available both for prospective childminders as set-up grants, and for existing childminders who wish to improve the quality of their service.
4. In England, Sure Start funds Childminder Start Up Grants which are available through local authorities, while the Welsh Assembly also provides start up grants.