



Northern Ireland
Executive

GUIDANCE FOR SOFT PLAY AREAS

**WE ALL
MUST DO IT
TO GET
THROUGH IT**



STAY SAFE



SAVE LIVES

Soft Play Areas Guidance

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Introduction

The purpose of this guidance is to inform the owners and operators of indoor soft play areas in Northern Ireland of ongoing legal restrictions and requirements related to the coronavirus, and to help them re-open.

Indoor soft play areas, also sometimes known as indoor play centres and indoor playgrounds. They are specifically designed for children to play in, with structures and play equipment often padded to absorb the impact when children fall or bounce around. As well as specific areas created for the purpose of indoor play, facilities such as these are often found in a range of buildings and services used by parents including service stations, shopping centres and some larger tourist attractions.

The diverse range of facilities means that some parts of the guidance will be more relevant to some play areas than others.

This document sets out guidance on how to work safely. It gives practical considerations of how this can be applied in the workplace. This guidance does not supersede any legal obligations relating to health and safety, employment or equalities and it is important that as a business or an employer, you continue to comply with your existing obligations, including those relating to individuals with protected characteristics. When considering how to apply this guidance, take into account freelancers, agency workers, contractors and other people, as well as your employees.

Each business will need to translate this guidance into the specific actions it needs to take, depending on the nature of their business, including the size and type and how it is organised, operated, managed and regulated.

The steps and activity that you plan should be proportionate (i.e. suitable in size, amount and degree in respect of your business), should be reviewed regularly, and must offer a careful, phased approach to re-opening. Organisations should also focus on creating adaptable solutions that can be paused or rapidly reversed in the event of further COVID-19 outbreaks.

Even when the restrictions are lifted, you should only reopen or restart activities when you feel able to do so safely. The aim is to enable owners and operators of soft play areas to protect their staff and reopen their workplaces and enable members of the public to enjoy their services whilst also minimising risk.

This guidance should also be considered in the context of other applicable statutory duties and relevant guidance that will affect the way we move forward. These include, restrictions across Northern Ireland on the need to self-isolate and arrange a COVID-19 test for individuals and households with symptoms of coronavirus, the need to adhere to social distancing measures and travel guidance.

Planning for Reopening

i) Assessing your Facility Risk

To reopen a premises, operators must undertake a risk assessment to identify, assess and manage the risks of COVID-19, and in particular businesses should consider the risks to their workers and customers. You must make sure that the risk assessment for your business addresses the risks of COVID-19, using this guidance to inform your decisions and control measures. A risk assessment is not about creating huge amounts of paperwork, but rather about identifying sensible measures to control the risks in your premises. Your risk assessment will help you decide whether you have done everything you need to.

Transmission of COVID-19 is most strongly associated with close and prolonged contact in indoor environments. The highest risks of transmission are in crowded spaces over extended periods and social distancing is an important mitigation measure. Risks should be reduced to the lowest reasonably practicable level by taking preventative measures.

Organisations should consider some of the principles below when assessing risks associated with the facility:

- The need to demonstrate a formal, consistent, and proactive approach to assessing risk and taking appropriate action.
- Risk assessments should be 'live' documents and regularly reviewed (at least weekly) and particularly in light of changes to legislation, government guidance, lessons learned and any other examples of best practice elsewhere.
- Minimising the need for work related journeys and face to-face contact.
- Considering the minimum safe level of staffing – for example to maintain the specific COVID-19 protocols or in the event of a member of staff or volunteer becoming unwell, or needing to isolate repeatedly. This may determine customer capacity on site.
- On staffed sites, what arrangements need to be put into place in the event of someone becoming unwell whilst on the premises?

- All risk assessments should recognise that communication, training, and appropriate equipment are significant factors in reducing risk.
- Also focus on creating adaptable solutions that can be paused or rapidly reversed in the event of further COVID-19 outbreaks (i.e. consider how you would revise your operating practices swiftly should the need arise).

ii) Preparing workplaces/venues/buildings for reopening

- You should carry out statutory health and safety buildings checks prior to reopening for staff or visitors (e.g. legionella, water temperature, gas and electrical testing).
- Where mains water has been turned off since the close of the premises at lockdown, when it is reconnected it will need running through to flush away any microbiological or chemical residues built up while the water supply was disconnected.
- Maintaining good ventilation in the work environment. For example, opening windows and doors frequently, where possible.
- Employers are required to ensure an adequate supply of fresh air through natural or mechanical ventilation and this has not changed.
- Fans would recirculate the current air, so wouldn't be advised.
- Deep clean public and workforce areas prior to re-opening and implementation of revised and enhanced cleaning regimes.

iii) Communications

Public confidence will be key to supporting a successful and commercially viable return to business, and good communications can help to create this. People may feel anxious about public gatherings, especially those that take place indoors, for a long period of time. Plans for reopening will need to take into account public perceptions and due consideration will also need to be given to local communities in which your organisation exists and operates. Good, sustained communication and links with local communities will be key to increasing confidence in the preparations that have been implemented to minimise the spread of COVID-19.

Guest communications and resulting guest behaviours will play a large part in the relaunch of soft play areas. The use and operating culture will need to be reviewed and assessed in line with the new social distancing protocols we now live with. Changes in use and operation of soft play areas should be communicated to visitors

prior to planning a visit, at the main point of entry, and throughout your facility in key points. This should include information on:

- Social distancing requirements – both on the play frame and in the rest of the soft play area
- Cleaning and hygiene requirements
- Face covering requirements for those over 13 (except when eating and drinking and those who are exempt)
- How the soft play area will comply with Test and Trace
- What to do if you think you are ill in the soft play area

Furthermore communication throughout the entire guest journey will assist with the day to day operation and compliance with new procedures and customer guidance. When communicating safety messages owners/operators should ensure they are able to reach those with hearing or vision impairments. Consideration should also be given on how to assist those with disabilities with complying with the changes

Guest Pre-visit communications

- Utilise website and social media channels giving guests pre-visit information on what the soft play area has in place to control risks and support social distancing.
- Customers should be advised that if they are feeling ill, showing signs of the virus or live in the same household as someone with the virus, they should not be visiting the soft play area.

Information on arrival and throughout the soft play area

- Information should be displayed at main entrance points/reception areas about social distancing protocols in place in the facility, and the need to provide details for Test and Trace purposes.
- Signage at hygiene stations, which may include hand sanitising products or traditional soap and water facilities along with directional signage around the facility to the nearest locations.
- Signage in toilets about how to clean your hands correctly – use child-friendly signage as well as messages for adults.
- Information around the facility highlighting the increased cleaning schedules in place and this may involve some areas being closed off periodically to fully sanitise the area.

- Utilise public safety announcements and digital screens to repeat practices being applied throughout the facility.
- Information requiring children to wash hands prior to attending the party room and time should be allocated for this. Regular announcements to remind guests about handwashing.
- Information to remind adults and children not to put their mouths on equipment or their hands in their mouths
- Display information about what a guest should do if they start to feel ill whilst on site – and a protocol put in place, where customers are taken to an area to minimise contact with staff and other guests, whilst assistance is sought. Try to promote your site as a contactless payment preferred venue – cashless and pre booked tickets online and food ordering.

Managing your customers and visitors

Organisations have a duty to reduce customer and employee risk to the lowest reasonably practicable level by taking preventative measures. In the context of COVID-19, this means protecting the health and safety of your workers and customers by working through the steps outlined below.

i) Bookings

- Organisations should consider having limited closed group sessions per day with allocated time slots for entry and exit with appropriate time for cleaning in between sessions.
- Customers should be recommended to book online, and the venue should facilitate this, collecting adequate identifiers for Test and Trace purposes.
- Remember that some people do not have internet access. You should make provision for them to be able to make bookings and enquiries offline.

ii) Social Distancing

- Employers must comply with the social distancing duties, both in relation to their employees and to users of their services. There may be a very limited number of work circumstances where measures cannot reasonably be taken to ensure 2 metres distance between people.
- Where the social distancing guidelines cannot be followed in full, in relation to a particular activity, businesses should consider whether that activity needs to continue for the business to operate, and if so, take all the mitigating actions possible to reduce the risk of transmission between individuals.

- It may be necessary to consider moving some equipment to allow for distancing on access routes. Owners and operators should also consider the numbers of people using equipment at a time and introduce measures to manage this where necessary.
- Once inside a soft play area, customers should remain with their group, and maintain appropriate social distance to individuals and groups outside their own.

iii) Attendance and Customer Management

- Organisations may wish to perform temperature checks to customers upon arrival to decrease the risk of transmission.
- Organisations should encourage only one guardian to attend to supervise the children they are responsible for to keep the number of adults in the venue to a minimum.
- In line with Government regulations, the wearing of face coverings for adults in enclosed public spaces (and children aged 13 and older excluding employees) should be strongly advised as it is mandatory in these settings. Organisations should develop a policy for non-compliance.
- Assess the number of customers, or crowd density, which can reasonably enable physical distancing within any space. This will vary depending on layout or usage. This will require taking into account the total floor space as well as pinch points and busy areas.
- Review how customers move through and around the venue (indoors and outdoors) and consider how you could adjust the flow of customers and employees to reduce congestion and contact; for example, queue management, supervised counting (to keep number numbers down in any particular play zone/area) or one way flow, where possible. For smaller play areas, it is advised only one household/booking group access each zone at any given time.
- Manage queues to ensure they do not cause a risk to individuals or other businesses, for example by introducing queuing systems, using barriers and having staff direct customers. This may include using outside premises for queuing where available and safe, for example some car parks. Have contingency plans in place for periods of poor weather.
- Ensure any changes to entry, exit and queue management take into account reasonable adjustments for those who need them, including disabled customers.
- Create clear signage for customers explaining the provisions in place, reminding of physical distancing (including distancing from employees) and promoting the use of contactless payment.

- Remind customers that they are responsible for supervising their children at all times and should follow physical distancing guidelines. Young children (those of primary school age or younger) are no longer required to socially distance outside, and it is generally understood that very young children find social distancing more difficult to understand. Adults, even when accompanied by young children, are still required to distance from one another.
- Focus on promoting responsible behaviour by children, parents, carers and guardians.

iv) Considering Children with Additional Needs

Owners/operators must take into account the requirements of children with additional needs.

Issues that are likely to be specific to this group include:

- An understanding that many need frequent reminders about rules of behaviour in playground settings.
- Changes to familiar environments are likely to require longer periods of adjustment.
- Children with physical and sensory disabilities may need assistance with moving from one place to the next.
- Some children with additional needs such as autism find it difficult to adjust to particular clothing requirements, and therefore may be less willing to use face coverings or similar if requested.
- Some additional needs are not evident, such as hearing loss, and may therefore account for non-responsiveness to verbal instruction.
- Queuing for apparatus or toilets can be a source of frustration, and the cause of agitation.

v) Catering Facilities and Party Rooms

- Tables and any seating areas (including in cafeterias, party areas and supervision areas) should be placed so that they facilitate 2m social distancing. Where required, this may involve removing some tables, chairs and benches.
- Where possible, catering options should be booked in advance (e.g. over the phone) to limit queues at any catering points. Where this is not possible, screens should be erected at customer service points.

- Customers should be required to wash or sanitise hands prior to, and after using any equipment within this space.

Hygiene and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

i) Summary Steps:

- Frequent cleaning of work areas and equipment between uses by using your usual cleaning products.
- Frequent cleaning of objects and surfaces that are touched regularly, machines or staff handheld devices, and making sure there are adequate disposal arrangements for cleaning products.
- Clearing workspaces, removing waste and belongings from the work area at the end of a shift.

ii) Facility Equipment

- Play with sand, water, plasticine, play dough, cookery and other messy play activities should be restricted.
- Equipment, toys and surfaces, including toilets, sinks, taps and changing areas, tables and handles should be cleaned and disinfected frequently. This should include additional cleaning of touch points during sessions, as well as before and after. Play frames should be cleaned at the start and end of the day with relevant sanitising products or a fogging machine.
- Particular cleaning attention must be paid to areas such as slides, monkey bars, enclosed crawl through 'tunnels' or tube slides and handholds.
- You should consider removing soft toys and toys that are hard to clean (such as those with intricate parts). Outdoor equipment and entrance gates should also be cleaned and disinfected frequently. Equipment such as ball pits and soft foam pits should not be used.
- Role-play props will also be considered as single-use items and a suitable system must be in place for the handling, cleaning and sanitisation of props to facilitate this. Role-play rooms should be cleaned in line with other indoor area frequencies. Role-play areas should be restricted to one booked group, to reduce the risk of items being shared between different groups of children.
- Pay particular attention to the withdrawal of unnecessary play items that children will put in their mouths or around their faces which are a high transmission hazard.

iii) Sanitisation Facilities

- Hand sanitiser posts should be supervised and mandated (i.e. not optional), especially at entry and exit points including in and out of play areas. The venue requires a suitable policy for dealing with non-compliant customers for the safety of other customers and staff.
- Using signs and posters to build awareness of good handwashing technique, the need to increase hand washing frequency, avoid touching your face and to cough or sneeze into a tissue which is binned safely, or into your arm if a tissue is not available.
- Providing hand sanitiser in multiple locations in addition to washrooms.
- Increase the frequency of handwashing and surface cleaning (including disinfection of high footfall areas or common touchpoints and toilet/restrooms).

iv) Toilet and Waste Facilities

- Setting clear use and cleaning guidance for toilets to ensure they are kept clean and physical distancing is achieved as much as possible.
- Use of portable toilets should be minimised and special care should be taken for cleaning of portable toilets where they are in place.
- Use of physical distance marking for other common areas such as toilets, showers, lockers and changing rooms and in any other areas where queues typically form.
- Providing more waste facilities and more frequent rubbish collections.
- To enable good hand hygiene consider making hand sanitiser available on entry to toilets where safe and practical, and ensure suitable handwashing facilities including running water and liquid soap and suitable options for drying (either paper towels or hand driers) are available.
- Special care should be taken for cleaning of portable toilets and larger toilet blocks.
- Putting up a visible cleaning schedule can keep it up to date and visible.
- Providing more waste facilities and more frequent rubbish collection.

v) Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

PPE protects the user against health or safety risks at work. It can include items such as safety helmets, gloves, eye protection, high-visibility clothing, safety

footwear and safety harnesses. It also includes respiratory protective equipment, such as face coverings.

Where you are already using PPE in your work activity to protect against non COVID-19 risks, you should continue to do so.

Although it is not mandatory for employees to wear face coverings, employers should support their workers if they choose to wear one. This means telling workers:

- Use hand sanitiser before putting a face covering on, and after removing it.
- When wearing a face covering, avoid touching your face or face covering, as you could contaminate them with germs from your hands.
- Change your face covering if it becomes damp or if you've touched it.
- Change and wash your face covering daily.
- If the material is washable, wash in line with manufacturer's instructions. If it's not washable, dispose of it carefully in your usual waste.

vi) Ventilation

Ventilation is an important part of mitigating against the transmission of COVID-19. Ventilation into the building should be optimised to ensure a fresh air supply is provided to all areas of the facility and increased wherever possible. Particular attention should be given to areas where high intensity exercise activity takes place. Ventilation systems should provide 100% fresh air and not recirculate air from one space to another.

You should also consider:

- Increasing the existing ventilation rate
- Operating the ventilation system 24 hours a day.
- Increase the frequency of filter changes.

Workforce management

i) Summary Overview:

- When planning for any reopening, you will need to consider any notice periods or other arrangements required for furloughed or redeployed staff to return to work.

- Considering who is essential to be on the premises; for example, back of house workers should work from home if at all possible.
- Planning for the minimum number of people needed on site to operate safely and effectively.
- Consider how people get to and from work. If employees are spending significant time on crowded public transport, this increases the risk of the virus entering the workplace. Staff should be reminded of the rules regarding the use of face coverings on public transport. You should show flexibility on this issue, including allowing workers to work from different locations where possible, looking at different start and finish times, and supporting workers getting to and from the workplace.
- Keeping in touch with off-site workers on their working arrangements including their welfare, mental and physical health and personal security.
- Providing equipment for people to work from home safely and effectively, for example, remote access to work systems.
- Employers should consult with their employees to determine who can come into the workplace safely taking account of a person's journey, childcare responsibilities, protected characteristics, and other individual circumstances. Extra consideration should be given to those people at higher risk.

ii) Protecting people who are at higher risk

Extremely vulnerable individuals, who have been shielding because they are at higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19, have been asked to take extra care in observing social distancing and should be helped to work from home, either in their current role or in an alternative role.

Employers should consider offering individuals at increased risk of serious illness from COVID-19 alternative safer available on-site roles, ensuring that they maintain the required distance away from others. If they have to spend time within this distance of others, you should carefully assess whether this activity should continue. If so, further mitigating actions should be taken to reduce the risk of transmission between staff. As for any workplace risk you must take into account specific duties to those with protected characteristics, including, for example, expectant mothers.

iii) People who need to self-isolate

Individuals who are advised to stay at home under the NI Government's self-isolation guidance should not physically come to work. This includes individuals who have been tested positive for COVID-19, or those who have symptoms of COVID-19 as

well as those who live in a household with someone who has symptoms or been tested positive.

iv) Physical distancing at work

Physical distancing applies to all parts of a premises where business is conducted, not just the place where people spend most of their time, but also entrances and exits, break rooms, staging sites and store rooms, canteens and similar settings. These are often the most challenging areas to maintain physical distancing.

Steps that will usually be needed:

- Reducing congestion, for example, by having more entry points to the workplace in larger businesses.
- Using markings and introducing one way flow at entry and exit points which are back of house or employee-only and where appropriate, taking into account premises structure, style of operation and customer profile.

v) Moving around buildings

- Reducing maximum occupancy for lifts, providing hand sanitiser for the operation of lifts and encouraging use of stairs wherever possible.
- Making sure that people with disabilities are able to access lifts.
- Regulating use of high traffic areas including stairwells, corridors, lifts, turnstiles and walkways to maintain social distancing and increasing the frequency of cleaning and disinfection of these areas.

vi) Communications and training

- Providing clear, consistent and regular communication to improve understanding and consistency of ways of working.
- Engaging with workers and worker representatives through existing communication routes to explain and agree any changes in working arrangements.
- Developing communication and training materials for workers prior to returning to site, especially around new procedures for arrival at work.
- The process for managing soft play areas will be a written document and form part of the business COVID-secure opening protocols. Employees will be trained in this process.

vii) Accidents, security and other incidents

In an emergency, for example, an accident, provision of first aid, fire or break in, people should not have to stay the recommended distance apart if it would be unsafe. People involved in the provision of assistance to others should pay particular attention to sanitation measures immediately afterwards including washing hands.

Steps that will usually be needed:

- Reviewing your incident and emergency procedures to ensure they reflect the physical distancing requirements as far as possible.
- You must ensure any COVID-19 adaptations support your emergency preparedness. Issues could include your fire alarm muster stations, access for emergency response teams, dealing with violent or aggressive people and other threatening situations.
- Check that trained first-aiders are still willing to undertake these roles and update any first aid training to include COVID-19 protocols.