



An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthaí Óige
Department of Children
and Youth Affairs

Planning for reopening Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare Services

Report for Government

29 May, 2020

Contents

Summary	4
Background.....	7
The Roadmap	7
The sector and capacity	7
Parental fees	8
Childcare Usage	8
DCYA objectives in supporting the sector to reopen after COVID-19	9
International summary: Reopening in other jurisdictions	10
Challenges for reopening in other jurisdictions	10
Parents’ and providers’ concerns	10
Key considerations	11
Factors informing the proposed approach	12
Health of children, staff and families	12
Eligibility and prioritisation of places	13
Capacity in the sector	14
Cost of lower capacity and additional Health and Safety measures	16
Deliverables required and timeframe to enable reopening on 29 June	16
Planning for ECCE September 2020	17
Proposed service and model.....	18
Funding	18
Overview of proposed funding approach	19
Impact on the child.....	21
Logistical arrangements for reopening of services.....	23
Preparation for reopening	23
Surveillance and monitoring	24
Impact for the Department of Education and Skills.....	26
Communications	27
Engagement with key stakeholders	27
Direct engagement with childcare providers	27
Communications from the Advisory Group	27
Communications by the Department	28

Risks	29
Appendix 1: Countdown of requirements to enable June 29 opening.....	30
Appendix 2: IPSOS MRBI Survey of Parents/ Guardians	31

Summary

The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has been working with her officials to develop plans for the phased reopening of early learning and care and school age childcare services. This is a work in progress. The approach proposed is set out in the attached report and further details will be developed in the short time ahead. The main features of the plans to date are summarised below.

1. Detailed public health guidance that is specific to childcare services has been provided by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC). It was approved by the Expert Advisory Group of NPHET on 27 May. The Minister believes that this provides a clear and achievable basis for reopening of childcare services from 29 June and will support childcare providers in planning for reopening. Critically, the funding model to support childcare services to reopen with reduced capacity is the subject of continuing discussion with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the overall approach will require approval by Government. This will be sought as soon as possible.
2. The HSE/HPSC-recommended “pod” model will be applied to the restricted reopening of childcare services. This model is based on the current evidence in relation to COVID-19 in children and on the premise that social distancing is not possible with children in this context. The focus will be on restricting interactions between closed groups of children and adults (to be termed “play-pods”). This model is expected to help providers restore a significant amount of their capacity. However, the availability of staffing may limit capacity and reduced parental demand may reduce the number of children in settings relative to pre-COVID levels. The capacity in terms of public health considerations will depend on a number of elements such as the available space and the layout of the individual premises. Throughout the phases of reopening, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs will keep the operation of public health guidance under close review and take appropriate updated action as required.
3. In the best interests of children and parents, children should, as far as possible, be enabled to return to the childcare service they attended pre-COVID-19. Given the changed model of interaction and the time lapse since children last attended, it is important that there is as much continuity as possible for children. In light of the necessary changes, parents may also feel more reassured by placing their children in the care of childcare practitioners with whom they already have a relationship. Familiarity with other children attending the service and their parents may also help with the settling-in phase.

The phased reopening will seek to:

- meet the needs of the increasing range of parents and guardians who are returning to work, and
- prioritise the needs of vulnerable children who need childcare on child welfare grounds.

In order to achieve this, childcare providers will determine locally which children can attend their services from 29 June. The Department will provide guidance to services to support prioritisation in cases where demand exceeds supply. This approach will allow the receipt of childcare services from 29 June by:

- children of health and social care workers, other frontline workers, childcare practitioners themselves, and parents who need access to childcare in order to return to work. In the first instance, places will be available to families from these categories who previously used the childcare services,
 - vulnerable children, including children sponsored under the National Childcare Scheme (for example, children who are in the international protection process and children of families who are homeless) along with children funded through legacy childcare schemes who are experiencing poverty, disadvantage or child welfare issues,
 - children with disabilities, including those preparing to start school in September,
 - other children previously registered in childcare services on March 12, whose parents continue to need childcare and who were assured that they would retain their place through conditions attached to the DCYA Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme, and
 - subject to local availability of places, children who did not previously use childcare services and whose parents are now seeking a place.
4. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs will engage with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on budgetary measures necessary to enable the reopening of services. Any intervention would require a sustainable and viable mechanism which could be applied from the initial phase of reopening, through to operating at full capacity when public health guidance allows. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs will revert to Government for a decision on these matters as soon as possible.
 5. The Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme is due to end on June 18. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs will seek the approval of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to renew this until June 28, when an alternative arrangement may be put in place.
 6. Childminders will be permitted to resume looking after children in the childminder's home from June 29, while complying with HPSC/public health advice.
 7. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is engaging intensively with eight organisations representing the childcare sector, including one representing the childminding sector and a trade union representative. The Department has begun issuing a range of guidance and resources to assist the sector in preparing for reopening. This will continue over the 4 remaining weeks before opening.
 8. The Department is prioritising the actions necessary for reopening on 29 June. Once these are advanced, priority will move to the more detailed planning for the resumption of ECCE

(free pre-school programme) and AIM (the Access and Inclusion Model for the participation of children with disabilities in ECCE) at the end of August.

9. The Department is developing a communications plan to encourage childcare providers and their staff to help reopen society and business. DCYA is also developing communications to answer parents' questions with regard to COVID-19 related risks in childcare and measures being taken to minimise risk. Relevant information will be shared with members of the Oireachtas.

In planning for reopening on 29 June and the resumption of ECCE services and likely increased demand in September, the Minister is conscious of the need to attract staff back into the sector. Low pay and the prevalence of part time work in the sector could make this challenging, as well as the interaction with the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme. Further consideration will be given to these issues with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the coming days.

Background

The Roadmap

The Government's Roadmap to Reopening Society and Business sets out Ireland's plan for lifting COVID-19 restrictions through five phases. The phased reopening of childcare services includes the following:

- Phase 3 (29 June), opening of crèches, childminders and pre-schools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.
- Phase 4 (20 July), opening of crèches, childminders and pre-schools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

The reopening of Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare (ELC and SAC) services will be guided by this framework. It will be underpinned by the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, expert public health advice, expert sectoral advice, and available evidence / learning from international experience.

The sector and capacity

All 4,500 early learning and care and school age childcare services in this country are private entities with 25% operating on a not-for-profit basis. In 2018, parental fees represented approximately 42% of income for the entire sector, while State funding represented the remaining 58%. Before COVID-19, the 2020 public sector budget for the sector was €638m and at that time there were an estimated 220,000 childcare places available across early learning and care and school-age childcare.

Phase 3 is due to occur at a time when more than half of all services are normally closed for the summer. This is because 1,500 services only offer ECCE (free pre-school programme) and some other services only operate during term times. Others have identified that there is reduced demand for childcare services over the summer months. As a result less than 2,000 services (approximately) are expected to be considering reopening on 29 June (a survey of providers currently underway will verify this).

The DCYA is leading extensive engagement with the sector to assist with the phased reopening. Comprehensive public health guidance has now been received enabling DCYA to develop a proposed model of delivery with likely reduced numbers of children attending and a reformed way of working within childcare services to reflect the public health guidance.

Several challenges and risks are associated with this reopening. However, every effort is being made to encourage and support services to reopen from 29 June. Whilst DCYA is working hard to support as many services as possible to reopen, and indeed to encourage some who normally close over the summer to offer some capacity if it is needed, undoubtedly a range of factors will result in some services opting not to open until September at the earliest. If demand proves strong, capacity issues could present.

Historically, pre-COVID-19, issues relating to lack of capacity, along with significant recruitment and retention challenges remain unresolved and require consideration during current planning.

Parental fees

The average full time fee (gross) for childcare per child per week was €184 in 2019. A significant majority (approximately 90%) of the 220,000 children attending services received some subsidy from the Government. This was either through the free pre-school programme (ECCE) which is estimated to save parents over €2,500 per annum in childcare fees over the two years of the programme, or through National Childcare subsidies which can be as much as €200 per week per child or through a universal subsidy for children under 3 of €1,040 per annum.

Childcare Usage

Before COVID-19, the following is the estimated breakdown of childcare arrangements for families: -

- 20% centred based (e.g. crèche or pre-school)
- 15% childminder or nanny
- 10% family
- 55% a parent.

96% of children from the age of two years and eight months participate in ECCE (free pre-school programme) for 15 hours per week, 38 weeks per annum. They are eligible for 2 years of the programme.

DCYA objectives in supporting the sector to reopen after COVID-19

DCYA does not provide early learning and care or school age childcare services, nor does it employ staff within the sector. DCYA provides subsidies or capitation grants to services to reduce (or eliminate) the fee charged to parents. In the COVID-19 pandemic, DCYA has introduced a number of supports to retain as many services as possible and their staff. A new set of supports is now required for services to reopen, both in June and September 2020. This is essential given the sustainability and staff retention issues that existed prior to COVID-19. The Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) and a range of other Government measures have had a positive impact. 85% of services signed up to the TWSCS and applications to TWSCS continue to be received.

DCYA is clear that decisions regarding reopening are for the private operators within the sector to make. The 4,500 services which will hopefully reopen over the coming months will each make their own decisions. They will be responsible for providing a safe environment for their staff and the children who attend. DCYA will support these services with the many challenges of reopening.

DCYA's principal objectives for reopening are to support:-

- early learning and care and school-age childcare services to provide safe environments that comply with public health guidance.
- better outcomes for children by enabling critical early learning and care and school-age childcare services to resume in a manner that minimises risk and offers a high quality service.
- parents to return to work in order to support their families and in turn support economic recovery.

To achieve these objectives, DCYA has to have regard to maintaining optimal capacity levels, and retaining staff so that short, medium and possibly long term needs are addressed.

International summary: Reopening in other jurisdictions

Phased full reopening is underway across many jurisdictions. Some have focused in the initial phases on special education, smaller group sizes, care responsibilities, or the children of healthcare/essential workers. Many jurisdictions maintained a service for essential or healthcare workers throughout. Approaches in jurisdictions vary, and include a *contact bubble* approach, and lower maximum group capacities (e.g. 3-6 in Norway, 10 in Lithuania, 15 in New Brunswick).

Where reopening is occurring, health protocols are in place, including smaller groups, hygiene and infection control guidelines, training for staff and information for parents (e.g. Norway has been instructive in this regard.) Consideration has also been given to core elements of curricula, and on balancing children's needs for play and activities with friends, and infection control.

Challenges for reopening in other jurisdictions

There is evidence that parents are concerned about services reopening, and may be unwilling to return their children to services, especially in the early days of reopening. Where reopening has occurred, initial uptake has been low but has increased over time.

To date, there have been two outbreaks in Canadian day-care centres which were available for frontline workers.

In Finland, where services remained open but saw a turnout of 20%, the city of Helsinki has reported cases of Covid-19 in 18 public services operating in the city. So far, 24 employees and two children belonging to different working groups have tested positive.

In all cases, there are practical challenges to be faced due to the varied nature of provision and spaces available for childcare in all jurisdictions.

Parents' and providers' concerns

The experience of other jurisdictions has almost universally seen the expression of significant concerns amongst providers and parents about reopening childcare settings during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of these, concerns around disease spread/contagion, health and safety are paramount.

Parental concerns:

- General concerns about contagion and health and safety
- Inability to work/return to work without childcare
- Impact on children's well-being and development.

- Challenges associated with taking care of children as a working parent

Provider concerns:

- General concerns about contagion and health and safety
- Financial sustainability (loss of parental income, State subsidy, etc.)
- Staff retention
- Practical concerns re: changing room ratios, physical spaces
- Difficulties of maintaining social distancing
- Risks for vulnerable staff members (underlying conditions, sick relatives, etc.)

It should be noted that while parental take-up has been initially low where settings have reopened, take-up has gradually risen. This could be due to the allaying of concerns, out of economic necessity, or other factors.

Key considerations

There are many logistical and practical hurdles to be overcome in relation to phased reopening and ensuring that childcare services are prepared to deliver in a reduced or modified capacity.

The challenges are both physical and cultural, and other jurisdictions have been pro-active in addressing these.

It is clear that, to initiate a phased reopening, it is of critical importance to allay the concerns of parents and providers.

In addition, financial considerations in relation to reduced numbers, reduced income from fees/subsidies, and knock-on effects on staff retention are challenges that countries seeking to support phased reopening need to address.

Factors informing the proposed approach

Health of children, staff and families

In the move to reopen early learning and care and school-age childcare services during the pandemic, there is inevitably a level of health risk to children, staff, and the families of both children and staff. The decision to reopen services at this time reflects evidence that the benefits and the risks of *not* opening (to the economy and to children’s well-being and development) outweigh the public health risks of reopening. Key to this decision is developing an approach to the delivery of early learning and childcare services that involves effective management and minimisation of the risk of infection. As HPSC guidance states, it is important that everyone has “a clear understanding of the benefits and risks of childcare and that it is not possible to guarantee that infection can be prevented in any setting, either in a childcare centre, a school or in a home”.

DCYA has worked closely with the HPSC in developing public health guidance that is specific to childcare services during the pandemic. This advice, *‘Infection Prevention and Control guidance for settings providing childcare during the COVID-19 Pandemic’*, was approved by the Expert Advisory Group of NPHET on 27th May and was published by the HPSC on 29th May. Implementation of this guidance will be critical to minimizing risk to children and adults.

Key considerations in developing the public health approach to early learning and care and school-age childcare services are that:

- social distancing is not possible between children in this context, and
- measures to reduce risk of infection transmission in childcare services should be child-centred and should avoid harming children’s early learning and development.

The HPSC has recommended use of ‘pods’, which is a group of children and staff who stay together each day, through the day. The purpose of a pod is to:

- limit the number of people a child has contact with,
- facilitate contact tracing,
- support close, positive interactions between children and their adult caregivers, and
- reduce the amount of contact adults have with each other.

For interactions that do not involve children, such as interactions between staff and with parents when dropping off and collecting children, the HPSC has recommended social distancing measures.

Eligibility and prioritisation of places

A contractual condition of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) (which is received by 85% of centre-based providers) is that services should retain places without charge for families who used those places pre-COVID-19, until such time as the services reopen. Among services not in receipt of TWSCS, there may be similar commitments or parents may have continued to pay to retain places. Furthermore, there are significant benefits for children's well-being and development in maintaining the link between parents, children and their pre-COVID-19 providers of early learning and care and school-age childcare. For these reasons, it is proposed that children should be enabled to return to the childcare service they attended pre-COVID-19.

It is acknowledged that the definition of essential workers will change over time. Over the coming weeks and months, a growing number of parents will need early learning and care and school-age childcare in order to work. Given the dependence of economic recovery and poverty reduction on parents' ability to work, ensuring availability of early learning and care and school-age childcare at an early stage of reopening is important, provided that services comply with public health advice and are child-centred in approach. It is proposed, therefore, that service providers should be allowed to determine locally which children can attend their services from 29 June. DCYA will provide guidance to services to support prioritisation in cases where demand exceeds capacity.

A significant benefit of this approach is that it will allow attendance from 29 June by vulnerable children who would benefit from return to their early learning and care and school-age childcare service at the earliest opportunity, including children for whom early learning and care and school-age childcare is important on child welfare grounds. This includes both children who have a National Childcare Scheme (NCS) sponsored subsidy (e.g. homeless children, referrals from Tusla and the HSE, and children who are in the international protection process) and other children where the service determines that early learning and care or school-age childcare is needed as early as possible on child welfare grounds.

Given these priority groups, it is possible that some healthcare and other frontline workers who previously did not use childcare services and now need childcare services (e.g. where grandparents are no longer available to provide childcare because of cocooning) may not be able to access places in the short term. Measures to increase capacity in the sector are discussed below.

ECCE (the free pre-school programme) will not open before the last week of August. A central principle underpinning ECCE is universal access. As some services may reduce the number of ECCE places, there may be a need to increase capacity in other ways in order to ensure access to ECCE for all children. Further consideration will be given to ECCE planning over the coming weeks and DCYA will revert to Government with an update.

Capacity in the sector

Pre-COVID-19 there were approximately 220,000 places in regulated services, including more than 160,000 early learning and care places (of which 106,000 were ECCE pre-school programme places and the remainder full-day and part-day childcare places) and more than 50,000 school-age childcare places. There were an estimated 12,000 childcare place vacancies.

It is difficult to predict the likely level of demand after 29 June. Demand for retention of pre-COVID-19 places is likely to fall because of job losses among parents, continued home-working by some parents, and concern among some parents about health risks of bringing their children into childcare services. At the same time, demand for new places may rise as a result of fall in usage of grandparental care and other arrangements (e.g. summer camps). It is expected that the demand for places will rise progressively over the summer and autumn as an increasing number of parents return to work and confidence grows among parents in the public health measures adopted.

It is anticipated that there will be a number of challenges in ensuring sufficient capacity in the sector following 29 June.

- The public health guidance for childcare services does not require any change to the Early Years Regulations, with statutory adult-child ratios and space requirements unchanged. Neither does it require services to make any set reduction in total numbers of children attending. Depending on the layout of the rooms, in some services it may be possible to comply with the guidance with no reduction in capacity. However, some services will need to reduce capacity in some rooms in order to comply with the guidance and to prevent contact between 'play pods'. The net effect will be some reduction in overall capacity in the sector.
- Some services may choose to delay reopening. While only seven services have notified Tusla since 12 March 2020 of their intention to close permanently, others may delay reopening beyond their expected reopening date, either because of concerns about health risks or because of financial difficulties in complying with the public health guidance. Capacity reductions because of public health measures will limit service providers' income from parental fees, and parents will not be able to afford higher fees. (The majority of services are normally closed during the months of July and August and are not expected to return until September. Less than 2,000 of 4,500 services normally open in July and August.)
- Some childcare practitioners may be unable, or reluctant, to return to work, because of underlying health conditions or pregnancy, or concerns around public health risks, either for the staff themselves or their families. Depending on decisions to be made about the funding model and conditions attached, workforce capacity may also be limited by financial disincentives for some staff to return to work. Evidence from the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers indicates that the low take-up among service providers partly reflected reluctance of many staff to take part in the scheme, for a variety of reasons. COVID-19 related workforce constraints are likely to compound

existing challenges with recruitment and retention in the early learning and care and school-age childcare workforce, related to pay levels and working conditions.

Insofar as capacity is lower than demand across the sector, there may – at least in some services, for a period of time – be rationing of places. It is hoped that this will be minimal. In relation to full-day care, this would involve some parents being unable to access childcare services. In relation to ECCE (the pre-school programme), capacity constraints may impact on whether all children will continue to be eligible to access 15 hours per week for 38 weeks over two years. Measures to ensure access to ECCE for all children might involve alternating days of attendance, reducing durations of pre-school sessions, and/or increasing the number of places through opening alternative provision.

The design of the funding model and its interaction with other financial supports such as the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment will be essential to addressing these challenges, in particular the issues of sustainability and staff availability. Effective communications over the coming weeks will also be key to building confidence among providers and staff, as well as parents, and allaying fears around the health risks.

To compensate for reduced capacity across the sector, there may be a need to support additional capacity. While some measures may be quick in effect (e.g. some ECCE-only services may open for other provision during the summer and beyond), other measures (e.g. wider registration and expansion of childminding) would need longer lead-in times.

- DCYA and Tusla will facilitate capacity extensions (e.g. opening additional rooms, extending hours, opening new premises, or changing from ECCE-only to part-time/full-time provision) as far as possible, subject to Early Years Regulations, planning permission and fire safety requirements, and to availability of qualified staff.
- Childminders form an important part of the sector. Approximately 15,000 childminders care for about 60,000 children (both pre-school and school-age) in the childminders' homes, with a smaller number operating in children's homes. Following closure of childcare facilities on 12 March, HSE guidance states that childminders are only allowed to operate in the homes of the children of essential workers, not in the childminders' homes. As a result, data from Childminding Ireland indicates that most childminders have stopped working. It is proposed that childminders will be permitted to work in the childminder's home from 29 June, subject to working within HPSC public health guidance.
- There may be scope for increasing capacity through further expansion of childminding provision. To provide assurance of quality standards, and to allow for subsidisation of parental fees, it would be necessary for a wider cohort of childminders to be brought within the scope of regulation. Currently fewer than 100 childminders are registered with Tusla, primarily as a result of exemptions from registration for childminders who care for fewer than seven children (and fewer than four pre-school children). In order to change this position, an amendment would be required to the Childcare Act. The Draft

Childminding Action Plan, published in August 2019, proposed a phased approach to the wider regulation of childminding. While there is scope for fast-tracking the reforms proposed, this would bring some risks in relation to quality standards and would have uncertain benefits in terms of increased childcare places available. It is proposed that the possibility of fast-tracking reform of childminding should be considered further over the coming weeks, depending on supply and demand of centre-based childcare places in the initial weeks after 29 June.

Cost of lower capacity and additional Health and Safety measures

DCYA is continuing to analyse data on the cost of delivering childcare where services cannot operate at full capacity. DCYA is also examining the impact of the recent HPSC guidance on staff and other costs. The results of this analysis will be shared when available.

Deliverables required and timeframe to enable reopening on 29 June

To ensure the reopening of services is achievable for June 29, there are a number of critical issues which need to be addressed within this timeframe: see Appendix 1 for more detail. In summary, they are as follows:

- Compliance with public health guidance, and measures to support child-wellbeing while complying with public health guidance;
- Additional one-off costs such as equipment or structural modifications;
- The funding model to be applied from 29 June and decisions regarding previous funding schemes. Ultimately, the funding model must build on existing systems and structures with appropriate modifications reflecting the impact of phased reopening.
- The budget to support reopening and to support services on an ongoing and viable basis.
- A suite of guidance, training and support materials for providers is in development. Dissemination of these materials at the earliest possible stage will support providers' decisions on reopening.

Any changes to fundamental implementation parameters could potentially render the plan to reactivate childcare much more challenging. With this in mind, key decisions will be taken at the earliest possible stage.

Planning for the ECCE Programme 2020/2021

DCYA is working to support a sustainable and managed reactivation of services and reintegration of children. This will begin on 29 June and ultimately it will entail the reactivation of the ECCE programme which would normally reopen after the summer break on 24 August.

Normally, ECCE reopening would see around 60-70,000 children returning to the childcare setting after the summer, and similar numbers participating in Early Learning and Childcare for the first time. There is also a cohort of children who participate in school-aged childcare during term-time only, and who are expected to return in September. Taking all groups of children into account, peak numbers in centre-based services stand at 220,000 in normal years.

For ECCE, full capacity could potentially mean, in some circumstances, two different groups in the same room with the same practitioners at different times of the day (one morning, one afternoon), or it may require reduced hours of attendance each week.

Further consideration will be required on these issues as reopening progresses beyond 29 June and the response by both providers and parents becomes clearer.

Proposed service and model

Funding

Prior to COVID-19, funding for the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector came from a combination of parental fees and State funding. Data from the *Independent Review of the Cost of Delivering Quality Childcare* undertaken by Crowe in Spring 2018 revealed that, on average, parental fees represented approximately 42% of income for the entire sector while State funding represented the remaining 58%. The degree of reliance on parental fees varied considerably however (see Table 1).

Table 1: Reliance on parental fees (Crowe)

% of income from parental fees	Percentage of all services
0%	32.1%
<0-10%	21.3%
<10-20%	10.5%
<20-30%	6.3%
<30-40%	5.8%
<40-50%	5.1%
<50-60%	4.5%
<60-70%	5.1%
<70-80%	4.0%
<80-90%	3.0%
100%	2.4%
Total	100.0%

During the initial closure period between 13 March and 5 April, an arrangement was made for payments under the DCYA ELC and SAC funding programmes to continue. This was in response to

a rapidly evolving and unprecedented situation. DCYA was aware that many services in contract with DCYA, with no or lesser degrees of DCYA funding, were extremely exposed with the loss of parental income. DCYA immediately began to consider funding options for the wider sector. Retention of places within all services was a priority given already existing capacity restraints and impacts on parents being able to work.

From 6 April, with re-purposed DCYA funding, the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS) was introduced as a supplement to the Revenue operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) to meet the particular needs of the early learning and care and school-age childcare sector. The TWSCS provided a top up of staff wages and a contribution towards ongoing overheads. As part of conditions, Providers gave a commitment to retain children's places, not to charge parental fees, and to encourage staff to engage in CPD during the closure period. To date, 85% of early learning and care and school-age childcare services have signed up to the TWSCS.

The TWSCS was introduced from 6 April and for the initial duration of the TWSS (i.e. until 18 June). It is envisaged that an extension of the TWSCS will be required – at least up until 28 June – while the approach to funding from 29 June is determined. DCYA will seek sanction from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for the continued use of childcare funding for this short extension in the coming days.

As indicated above, there are approximately 4,500 services on contract to deliver DCYA early learning and care and school-age childcare funded programmes. Based on data from 2019, less than 50% of these services normally operate during July and August.

Overview of proposed funding approach

The primary aim of the funding approach from 29 June will be to support the phased reopening of early learning and care and school-age childcare services. The DCYA objectives of early learning and care and school-age childcare funding will remain unchanged, including:

- Make high-quality early learning and care and school-age childcare affordable and accessible.
- Maintain and extend the supply of high-quality publicly subsidised early learning and care and school-age childcare to best serve the developmental needs of babies and young children, ensuring that it also reflects the needs and preferences of parents and families.
- Ensure that early learning and care and school-age childcare provision promotes participation, strengthens social inclusion and embraces diversity through the integration of additional supports and services for children and families with additional needs.

DCYA is currently considering funding options available that will allow services transition from phase 3 reopening, to normal service delivery.

The use of existing scheme systems, structures and governance safeguards is currently being examined and the earliest possible date to resume funding arrangements which pre-existed the 12 March closure is being explored. These funding arrangements are:

- the National Childcare scheme from 29 June,
- the legacy childcare programmes (Community Childcare Subvention Programme and Training and Employment Childcare Programme) from 29 June,
- the ECCE and AIM programmes from 24 August.

A number of issues arise in relation to a funding model for restricted reopening from 29 June 2020. Firstly, and as previously covered in this report, there may be reduced capacity arising from public health guidance. Secondly, there may be temporarily reduced occupancy as a result of lower parental demand. Indeed, a recent survey of parents undertaken by Ipsos MRBI on behalf of DCYA indicates that a significant proportion of parents that used ELC and SAC services in March 2020 will opt for an alternative arrangement even where ELC and SAC services reopen. International evidence suggests that demand will increase over time. Both of these issues will limit the ability of services to restore levels of income normally available to operate in a sustainable way that would allow them to deliver ELC and SAC as well as retaining staff.

DCYA will continue to engage with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in relation to a viable funding model for the sector and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs will bring proposals to Government as soon as possible.

Impact on children

Child wellbeing: The impact of the sudden closure of early learning and care facilities on 12 March on children and families has been significant. While some children may be enjoying spending more time with their family, the NUI Galway Corona Study (2020) is reporting high levels of anxiety among parents especially in relation to health concerns, working from home pressures, finances and lack of childcare. <https://www.nuigalway.ie/corona-study/>

Young children are experiencing this stress while missing their usual supports of grandparents and of playing with friends and staff in early learning and care and school-age childcare settings.

Initial findings from Co-SPACE Ireland, a study of school-age children and their parents at the University of Limerick, suggest that one third of parents surveyed reported that they were only meeting their children's needs 'a bit or not at all'.

Consistency of care is particularly important for young children. , Children will benefit from returning to familiar settings and reconnecting with friends and staff who know them well. The provision of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme since April has enabled services to retain staff, and the proposed approach of allowing services to prioritise families who used their service pre-COVID-19 will enable children to reconnect with the practitioners and children with whom they spent their days up until 12 March.

In addition to the economic benefits of providing childcare for working parents, return of early learning and care services will provide relief for parents, and will be a sign of hope and return to normality for young children and their families.

Children's learning and development: High quality early learning and care supports young children's learning and development, laying the foundations for later educational achievement, as well as supporting wider outcomes for children including health benefits. A range of quality supports, including the Aistear curriculum framework for children from birth to 6 years old, promote positive child outcomes from participation in early learning and care settings. Prolonged exclusion from access to early learning services may impact negatively on some children's learning and development.

While infection control measures will be necessary to comply with public health advice, it will be important that measures are supportive of and not harmful to children's wellbeing and development. It is accepted that social distancing is not achievable or desirable among children in this context. The guidance being developed on the basis of HPSC public health advice allows for the key-worker system that is a feature of quality practice, for continuity of practice through return to settings where children previously attended, and for close, positive interactions between adults and children through maintaining small groups ('play pods') through the day. The guidance also includes an emphasis on playing outside as much as possible. This will support Aistear to enhance children's sense of belonging and wellbeing through play.

As full-day services and childminders open from June 29, services will be able to develop approaches to practice that are compatible with public health guidance when relatively smaller numbers of children are present, which will help prepare for the expected return of ECCE (the pre-school programme) from 24 August.

Vulnerable children and child poverty: Reopening of services will support families to exit poverty through seeking employment or to avoid poverty by returning to work. In addition, it will be particularly beneficial for the wellbeing and development of vulnerable children and children living in very disadvantaged families, including children whose families are homeless, children in the international protection process, children in relation to whom there are child welfare and child protection concerns, and children whose parents are experiencing health difficulties such as post-natal depression.

Children who experience developmental delays due to the negative impact of living in poverty have a time-limited period before the delays and regression in developmental progress may have longer and more profound effects. Enabling participation in quality early learning and care settings will allow practitioners to begin to work again on supporting these children in familiar environments to ensure not too much ground is lost with this already vulnerable group.

Some vulnerable children have been invisible to support services during the closure period. Some early learning and care services have expressed concerns as to the well-being of such children. Early learning and care practitioners play an important role in child protection and are “mandated reporters” under Children First legislation. The closure of services has reduced this vital monitoring of children at risk and reduced reporting, leaving these children hidden from adults who can help them.

Logistical arrangements for reopening of services

Preparation for reopening

Preparations for reopening of Early Learning and Care, School-Age Childcare and Childminding (homebased) settings during the pandemic, which have begun and will continue more intensively in the weeks leading up to 29 June, include –

- issuing a communication to service providers to provide reassurance that they are permitted to travel to and enter premises to prepare those premises for reopening on 29 June,
- adjusting layouts of rooms in advance of reopening,
- installation of additional health measures such as signage, sanitisers and demarcated areas for arrival/collection of children,
- contacting parents to discuss their situation and needs,
- updating policies and procedures relevant to their own setting based on COVID-19 guidance,
- checking for staff availability to return to work, and
- providing instruction and training for staff in relation to public health guidance and protocols for infection control.

The *Return to Work Safely Protocol* is relevant to any business in preparation for returning to work during the pandemic. Specific guidance and templates pertaining to Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare settings are currently under development, based on the Return to Work Safely Protocol.

Staff in services will require clear instruction and training on their services' updated policies and procedures on drop off and collection, handwashing, respiratory hygiene and infection control. City and County Childcare Committees and Voluntary Childcare Organisations will support service providers in updating their policies and procedures for their own setting.

Working in collaboration with sectoral organisations, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is developing a suite of guidance, resources and training to support service providers and their staff which will be available on the First 5 website. These will support the changes in practice necessary to operate during the pandemic within Early Learning and Care, School-Age Childcare and Childminding (homebased) settings.

The reopening supports and guidance materials being developed include:

1. Preparedness for reopening
 - Guidance on terminology for shared understanding
 - Preparation for reopening Checklist for ELC/SAC services
 - Return to Work Safely Protocol - ELC/SAC guidance/templates.
2. Practice Support
 - Guidance on adapting environments and practice during COVID-19.
 - Supporting transitions for children into ELC/SAC settings – guidance, media clip.
 - Well-being webinars for practitioners.
 - Guidance on emotional support for children.
3. Information for Parents
 - Guidance for parents on accessing and participating in centre-based learning and care
 - A 'working together' agreement
4. Public Health
 - Infection Prevention and Control guidance for settings providing childcare during the COVID-19 Pandemic
 - Infection control training
5. Regulatory Support
 - Guidance for Early Years Services managing COVID-19
 - COVID-19 Tusla Notification for Early Years Services
 - Early Years COVID-19 Self-Assessment Checklist
6. Childminders
 - Specific guidance for childminders to support homebased childcare provision.

Surveillance and monitoring

In line with public health advice, service providers will be advised to promote awareness of COVID-19 and of the symptoms of COVID-19 among staff, parents and children. Parents will be advised not to present their child at the service if they or someone in their household has symptoms. Staff members will also be advised to not attend for work if they have symptoms or have been identified as a close contact of someone with COVID-19.

As services will need to review and update their policies and procedures before reopening, services will also need to train their staff in the revised policies and procedures. This will include training in relation to identifying the symptoms of COVID-19 in themselves or the children they are caring for and what to do if they suspect that they or a child has symptoms.

Where there is a suspected case in a service (staff member or child) the affected individual will be helped to leave the service as soon as is practicable, and will be separated from others in the service until they leave. They (or the child's parent) will be advised to contact their GP for further advice. If the doctor arranges testing for them, the childcare setting will be contacted by local

Public Health staff of the HSE to discuss the case, identify people who have been in contact with them and advise on any actions or precautions that should be taken.

Routine temperature checking or testing for staff has not been recommended by the HPSC, and staff will only be tested if they are symptomatic or as part of the contact tracing process.

In accordance with Regulation 31 of the Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016, a registered provider is required to notify Tusla within three working days of becoming aware of a notifiable incident. This includes the diagnosis of a child or any person working in the service as suffering from an infectious disease (including COVID-19). Tusla has developed a specific COVID-19 notification form to assist with this process. All service providers will receive this notification form and will be informed about their requirement to notify Tusla. Data gathered by Tusla through this process will enable monitoring of developments in relation to COVID-19 in early learning and care and school-age childcare settings on an on-going basis following reopening.

Impact for the Department of Education and Skills

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and the Department of Education and Skills (DES) have worked together closely on COVID-19 related issues. This has ensured appropriate sharing of information and joint problem solving. This engagement will continue over the coming months as schools and ELC and SAC services prepare to reopen.

Approximately 400 ECCE/ pre-school services operate on school premises. These provide much needed capacity for the ECCE programme. A small number of schools offer full-time ELC services in accommodation that was previously not required by the school. A number of schools offer school-age childcare.

Any change to the above arrangements could impact significantly on ELC and SAC capacity at local and national level. The two Departments will continue to work together to appropriately address shared challenges.

Should a scenario arise where schools resume in September with reduced hours, it must be noted that the childcare sector (which may also be operating at reduced capacity) may be unlikely to meet any increased demand arising. As stated earlier, Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare services managed a capacity of approximately 220,000 before COVID-19. The sector may have difficulties meeting demand from its previously registered parents from 29 June onwards. It is unknown whether it will be able to meet any significant additional demand resulting from schools potentially operating on reduced hours for children. DCYA will of course continue to actively monitor this situation and will do all it can to increase capacity or to work with DES to support other innovative ways of meeting needs.

Communications

Engagement with key stakeholders

The Department is engaging extensively with stakeholders in the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) sector. The Minister established an Advisory Group on Reopening of childcare services, which had its first meeting on 13 May and is meeting on a weekly basis, in addition to meetings of sub-groups, to advise the Department on service reopening. In establishing the Advisory Group, six places were provided for sectoral representatives. The sector itself decided on the nominees and these include representatives from the Association of Childhood Professionals, Early Childhood Ireland, the National Childhood Network, the National Community Forum, PLÉ, and Seas Suas. The Minister appointed Childminding Ireland to the Group because of the unique issues experienced by home-based service providers, and SIPTU given the role of Trade Unions in supporting society and business to reopen. Collectively these eight members represent tens of thousands of providers and practitioners.

The Minister has also established a Reference Group, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group and to enable the Department to consult with additional provider representative groups. The first meeting of the Reference Group, chaired by the Minister, took place on 28 May.

Direct engagement with childcare providers

The Department is engaging directly with all 4,500 providers across the country through regular emails, and is seeking their input to COVID-19 related challenges through a survey of all providers and a call for submissions on reopening.

Communications from the Advisory Group

A sub-group of the Advisory Group on Reopening (AGR) has been established to co-ordinate key communications and messaging around the work of the Group and service reopening. Members of the AGR have offered to work with the Department to agree key messages each week, to ensure coherence of information on the reopening plan.

The AGR communications sub-group will provide a forum to develop messages that address key concerns in the sector.

Communications by the Department

The Department will be using a number of communication channels to communicate with key audiences:

- **Childcare providers:** The Department communicates directly with providers via email on a regular basis, and will use this system to ensure all are informed, up to date and provided with available resources. Provider groups nominated to the AGR and the Reference Group will also keep their members up to date via their own communications channels.
- **Childminders:** Childminders are also represented on the AGR and the communications sub-group by Childminding Ireland, who will keep their members informed. The Department can also reach this audience via social media.
- **Parents:** Social and traditional media will be used to deliver key messages to parents.

The key messages which the Department intends to communicate in the coming weeks are:

- The public health advice for reopening of all services is to minimise risk as much as possible. This guidance will greatly support services in their plans to reopen and to offer a high quality service from June 29.
- Childcare services are encouraged to reopen
 - so that children have access to important ELC and SAC services, and
 - so that parents can return to work and in turn support economic growth.
- Childcare services are facing many challenges in reopening, which Government is working to address.

The Department intends to issue a press release after each Advisory Group meeting, supplemented by social media posts. Other ad hoc communications will be released as issues arise. The Department intends to take a proactive approach, putting information on service reopening out in the public domain as soon as it agreed – for example, health guidelines for operation of services were posted to the Department’s website and each provider alerted to them as soon as they were published by the HPSC.

In implementing the above, support from the Government Information Service will be vital. Proposed press releases will be shared with GIS each week before issuing.

Risks

The major risks to reactivation measures fall under two headings:

- **That the sector will not be able to activate from June 29 to such an extent that it can meet the demands of parents**, given the need to operate within public health guidance. The following risks arise in this context:
 - DEASP has reported that a significant number of childcare workers are in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). Low wages and part-time hours may make immediate return to the workforce a challenge for some staff.
 - Workers may be unavailable to return to work for a number of reasons, including health or family reasons and financial disincentives.
 - The sector may refuse to engage with reactivation arising from their concerns with conditions attached to reopening.
 - The sector may refuse to engage with reactivation due to perceived inadequacy of funding for once-off reactivation costs or ongoing payments through schemes.
- **That parents will be reluctant to return to childcare** for personal reasons including health or financial factors. The following risks arise in this context:
 - It may not be viable from a State funding perspective to give financial support for the opening of services with very low occupancy.
 - Services may become unsustainable, even with support measures in place, resulting in closure of services. This risk may arise in the short/medium term where parental choice with regard to childcare shifts.
 - Many parents may choose to wait until schools reopen to return to childcare, particularly those subject to restrictions requiring them to work from home.

Clearly the two risk groupings interact and the overall impact of those risks will be determined by the degree to which risks manifest. For example a high service activation combined with a situation where parental demand is low could increase the impact on the Exchequer and the sustainability of services.

In addition the following risks may be noted:

- Subject to whatever funding model may be agreed by DPER and Government, the cost to the Exchequer arising from a model which includes supports to compensate for loss of parental income will be highly variable. The variability will be based on rate of parental return to childcare. Preliminary indications are that some parents will be slow to return which could result in a high cost per child to the Exchequer depending on the extent of service usage and the funding model chosen.
- Capacity may be lost in the medium to longer term arising from accommodation issues, such as childcare services on school premises where those premises may have to be repurposed to support distancing/space measures within the school.

Appendix 1: Countdown of requirements to enable June 29 opening

Key dates	Requirements
By May 29	That service providers will know the public health guidance and whether there are any required changes to Regulations.
	•
	That eligibility of parents to access childcare from June 29 will be clear
	Clarity on insurance cover available to childcare providers from June 29
	That centre-based providers will be informed that they count as essential workers for the purpose of travelling to and entering premises to prepare for reopening.
By June 5	That the funding envelope available to support reactivation will be known including subsidies and grants for centre-based services and registered childminders
	That the sector will have specific guidance on management of their setting and quality practice within the context of public health advice
By June 12	That systems and structures to support management and disbursement of funding will be designed and ready to implement
By June 19	Funding agreements in place
By June 26	Further detail on next phases and in particular the start of the next major service delivery cycle for providers (concurrent with the reopening of schools in late August)
	Confirmation that Phase 3 will be activated on 29 th June as per the Roadmap on Reopening of Society and Business

Appendix 2: IPSOS MRBI Survey of Parents/Guardians

IPSOS MRBI undertook a survey of 563 households with children from May 22-24. Some initial findings are set out here.

Of the survey respondents, 51% (n=285) identified as male, with 49% (n=278) identifying as female. There was an average of two children per household surveyed. 64% (n=361) of respondents were employed full-time outside of the home pre-COVID-19. A further 13% (n=71) were employed part-time outside of the home. 8% (n=45) were engaged in home duties or caring. 11% (n=60) identified as self-employed, while the remaining 4% (n=26) comprised retired adults, students, those unemployed or unable to work and others. 34% (n=190) of respondents identified as essential workers. A significant majority of parents/guardians (80%; n=453) shared their household with a second adult able to look after children. 15% (n=84) had two or more other adults in the household able to look after children. Just 5% (n=26) of respondents had no other adult in their household able to look after children.

Childcare arrangements prior to the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions varied among those surveyed and data suggests parents/guardians may have had multiple arrangements in some cases. 56% (n=314) of respondents indicated that prior to restrictions, they or their partner had cared for at least one child at home. 27% (n=152) reported using a crèche or after-school service. A further 18% (n=101) of respondents had the support of the children's grandparent, while 15% (n=87) used a childminder in the childminder's home. Among the remaining responses, live-in au pairs or nannies accounted for 6% (n=33), other relatives accounted for 5% (n=28), family friends accounted for 1% (n=5), with other arrangements making up the remaining 4% (n=25).

Younger children were more likely to spend a longer time in centre-based services prior to the introduction of restrictions, with two-year-olds spending on average 35 hours a week in centre-based services. Four year olds, by comparison, were spending an average of 17 hours a week in centre-based services. School-age children attending centre-based services were typically spending between 15 and 19 hours a week in centre-based childcare services.

Unsurprisingly, since restrictions have been in place, the majority of children (97%; n=544) have been cared for in the home by their parent(s)/ guardian(s). A small number of parents reported childcare arrangements with other relatives (3%; n=17), grandparents (2%, n=12), childminders (1%, n=6) and au pairs or nannies (1%; n=6).

Looking ahead to demand once restrictions are lifted, parents/ guardians were asked to consider what type of arrangement they intend to use for each of their children. In contrast to the 27% (n=152) who reported using centre-based services prior to restrictions, just 13% (n=76) indicated an intention to use a centre-based service post-COVID-19. 72% (n=404) expressed their intention to care for their children at home, compared with 56% (n=314) prior to restrictions. A further 9% (n=51) indicated a preference to use a childminder once restrictions are lifted, down from 15%

(n=87) prior to restrictions. Just 7% (n=39) reported plans to use grandparents for childcare, down from 18% (n=101) prior to restrictions. Notably, 6% of parents/guardians (n=32) indicated they were unsure what type of childcare arrangement they intend to use once restrictions are lifted.

Parents not intending to go back to using a childcare services outside of the home (crèche, pre-school, school-age childcare, or childminder in their home) when the restrictions are lifted were asked their reasons for this. Of 118 households who do not intend to go back to using a childcare service outside of the home, 29% (n=34) indicated that they had made alternative plans anyway for the summer months, owing to usual service closures during this time. 20% (n=24) indicated that childcare would no longer be needed as other people in the household could look after the children. 12% (n=14) reported concern about their child/children's health as the primary reason. 8% (n=9) indicated that uncertainty about restrictions and social distancing measures informed their decision, while 4% (n=5) reported that there are other vulnerable people in their household and this has informed their decision.