

FAQ

Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) including Childminding Services over 1 February – 5 March 2021

Introduction

On Tuesday 26 January, Government made the decision to extend the suspension of the ECCE programme and to continue to restrict access to other Early Learning and Childcare services to the children of essential workers and to vulnerable children. It is currently planned for these arrangements to be in place until 5 March, with the timeframe remaining subject to review in the context of the evolving public health circumstances.

The present situation is undoubtedly challenging for everyone involved in Early Learning and Childcare including providers, staff, parents and children. In this context, my Department is endeavouring to balance a number of objectives:

- Supporting the overarching public health messages
- Ensuring that ELC remains open, even at very low levels of occupancy, and available for children and families who need it at this time, either to enable parents to work in an essential service or because of children's vulnerability
- Enabling providers to reimburse parents if they do not take up service
- Supporting providers to retain their staff
- Supporting providers' sustainability to enable services can return to normal once restrictions are lifted
- Achieving administrative efficiency through the continued use of existing funding schemes and other whole of economy supports (EWSS)
- Protecting exchequer investment

The package of measures described in this document is designed to ensure that the significant public money which is being invested in services at this time is structured in a fair and balanced way to help achieve these objectives.

Central to this package is the enhanced Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, which Early Learning and Childcare providers continue to be eligible to access, without having to demonstrate reduction in turnover as other employers do. All providers are encouraged to avail of this scheme which significantly contributes to payroll costs, covering at least 80% of average wage costs in most instances.

On top of this, although the ECCE programme has been suspended, at least 70% of ECCE funding can continue to be claimed by all services, whether open or closed and NCS, CCSP, TEC and AIM funding schemes continue to be payable full rates.

Closed services, in return for this funding, will be asked to commit to waiving parental fees, retaining staff where possible, keeping places for children and undertaking remote engagement with children. In open services, the remaining 30% of the value of the ECCE funding will also be made up, subject to services

providing the same assurances to the Department. Most services are doing this already, and I warmly welcome this.

We recognise that for some providers who are particularly reliant on parental fee income, the requirement to waive fees for families not using their service at this time presents difficulties. In these circumstances, a newly designed Covid-19 Operating Support Payment (COSP) is being put in place that will support these providers to parental waive fees during this period while remaining sustainable. Our estimates indicate that the overwhelming majority of providers will be sustainable with these measures. For the small numbers where there are particular challenges, the Sustainability Fund will open a new strand of funding tailored to the present arrangements.

Contributions from all parts of the sector have fed into to developing this package, including extensive consultations with sector representative organisations. I would like to thank everyone who has taken the time to share their perspectives to help to inform this work.

In particular though I would like again to express my gratitude of those who work in the sector, in operating and delivering services to children and families during this time. Your contribution to the country during this period of restrictions is vital. Without you, many other services and sectors of society would find it very difficult to function. Without you, many vulnerable children many not find the care and support that they need. You are providing an essential service and your contribution is very much appreciated.

Thank you,

Roderic O’Gorman TD
Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

Contents

Introduction	1
Overview	7
1. What ELC/SAC services can operate from 1 February?	7
2. What happens after this phase?	7
Conditions with regard to provision of funding for the period	8
3. What are the funding arrangement for this phase?	8
4. I am an open full-time provider and/or provide a School Aged Service , what payments are available to me?	8
5. I am an open part-time or sessional service, what payments are available to me?	9
6. I am a closed full-time provider and/or provide a School Aged Service approved for Force Majeure and not directed to close by public Health , what payments are available to me?	9
7. I am a closed part-time or sessional provider approved for Force Majeure and not directed to close by public Health , what payments are available to me?	10
8. I am a closed full-time provider and/or provide a School Aged Service approved for Force Majeure based on a direction to close by public Health , what payments are available to me?	10
9. I am a closed part-time or sessional provider approved for Force Majeure based on a direction to close by public Health , what payments are available to me?	10
10. I am an ECCE only service, what payments are available to me?	11
11. What is an ECCE-only service?	11
12. What is the Purpose of the COSP?	11
13. What services are eligible for the COSP?	11
14. How is the payment calculated?	12
15. I am due payment in the week ending 29 January, will I receive this funding?	13
16. How do I apply for the enhanced funding?	13
17. I have multiple services within my organisation and have consolidated provision, how are my services assessed for payment eligibility?	14
18. What will the compliance/verification requirements be?	14
19. What evidence/documentation will be required by the service to be retained for the compliance/verification checks?	14
Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)	15
20. Will AIM funding be available to services during this period?	15
21. Will AIM payments change because of the decision to delay the resumption of the ECCE programme?	15

Operation of ELC/SAC Services	16
22. What are the requirements for a service where a substantial majority of children are ECCE Programme only?.....	16
23. Am I required to open if I provide a Junior/Senior Infants “link” service?	16
24. I have more than one ELC/SAC facility and wish to close one facility whilst accommodating eligible children from the closed facility in another facility. Is this permissible?	16
25. How will families of essential workers and/or vulnerable children be supported to access ELC/SAC services?	17
26. Are School-Age Childcare (SAC) services catering for SAC children during current restrictions required to support remote school-work?	17
Essential workers	17
27. Who is an essential worker?	17
28. Do both parents need to be essential workers?.....	17
29. Is an ELC/SAC provider/staff an essential worker?.....	18
30. What should an ELC/SAC provider do if they have concerns that a parent is not an essential worker?	18
31. If an ELC/SAC service is required to prioritise amongst essential workers, who are the priority workers?.....	18
32. Am I expected to take in additional children of healthcare or other essential workers or children who are vulnerable?	18
Vulnerable children.....	18
33. Who is a vulnerable child?	19
34. What is a Sponsor arrangement?	19
Public Health	19
35. Why are ELC/SAC services being permitted to operate under the current Level 5 restrictions? The schools are closed, should ELC and SAC services close also?	20
36. Is there a higher risk from the new variant of Covid-19? Reports from the UK suggest it spreads more easily and that infection rates in children are higher than other Covid-19 strains.	20
37. Are there new symptoms that ELC/SAC providers, staff and parents need to look out for? Has the advice on runny noses changed?.....	20
38. Should ELC/SAC staff wear face coverings now?	20
39. What about staff who are in a high-risk category or whose family members are high risk? How can we protect them?.....	21
40. Will close contacts in ELC/SAC services still be referred for testing?	21
41. Should staff and children attending services undergo routine testing?	21

42.	Can the DCEDIY consider moving ELC/SAC staff further up the priority list for vaccinations?	22
43.	Are additional protective measures now required in ELC/SAC services?	22
44.	Is the public health guidance for SAC different from the guidance for ELC?	23
45.	What happens if there are suspected or confirmed cases of Covid-19 among staff or children in my service?.....	23
46.	Do I need to shut my service if a staff member or child is suspected to have Covid-19?	24
47.	What restrictions apply if someone returns from travel overseas?	24
48.	In relation to the direction that services are safe to operate, are geographical factors being taken into account?	24
49.	I have new children attending my service, can I assign them to existing play pods or do I need to create new play pods?.....	25
50.	I have fewer children in my service at present, can I merge some of my play pods?	25
51.	Can I merge play pods from different settings?	25
52.	I have moved some of my staff to shorter hours due to lower demand. Can I rotate the staff in my play-pods?	26
53.	Some of my staff share accommodation and/or transport to work. Do they have to work in the same play pod?.....	26
	Ongoing Engagement with ECCE Children	26
54.	While the ECCE Programme is not operating, are there activities that staff should be carrying out?	26
55.	Should I also promote remote learning for non-ECCE children who are not currently attending my service?.....	27
56.	Can I claim force majeure permission to close due to Covid-19 or for circumstances beyond my control e.g. access to school grounds where the service is normally provided?.....	27
57.	What should I do if I have no eligible children in my ELC/SAC service?	28
58.	If I am open, will I lose NCS, CCSP or TEC funding for children who do not attend between 1 February and 5 March for any reason?.....	29
59.	I provide ECCE alongside other ELC/SAC services, am I required to confirm whether ECCE only families need a place?	29
60.	Can a parent of an eligible child who normally only attends for ECCE change their arrangement to take up additional hours?.....	29
61.	What if I have sustainability concerns as a result of current restrictions in place on my service?	29
	Childminding and 'childminding bubbles'	30
62.	Can childminders still operate?	30

63.	Can grandparents or other relatives/close friends mind children?	30
64.	Are parents required to pay fees for January, if they cannot send their child in because they are/not essential workers, or the child is/not vulnerable?	30
65.	If a Childminder has a suspected or confirmed case of Covid-19?	30
66.	Are there financial supports for Childminders who are operating on reduced numbers as a direct result of current guidelines?	31
Parental Fees.....		31
67.	Are parents required to pay fees during this period, if they cannot send their child in because they are not essential workers, or the child is not vulnerable?	31
68.	I provide the ECCE Programme as part of full or part time day care. How do I deal with ECCE fees for parents of eligible children who are attending for ECCE hours and additional hours?	32
Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme.....		32
69.	What is the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS)?	32
70.	Am I an eligible employer?.....	32
71.	What are the subsidy rates available?	33
Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19 from DSP		33
72.	What is the Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19?	33
73.	How do I qualify for the Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19?.....	34
74.	What is the rate of payment for the Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19?	34
75.	Does the DSP Covid-19 Illness Benefit apply if a Covid-19 test result is negative?	34
76.	Can the DSP Covid-19 Illness Benefit be in respect of a shorter period than a week?.....	35
77.	Does the DSP Covid-19 Illness Benefit apply in the scenario where a GP decides it is not necessary for an individual to be tested/self-isolate but that individual may already have called in sick to work for a period?	35
Staffing issues and concerns		35
Appendix 1: Case Studies		36
	Case study (1).....	36
	Case study (2).....	36
Appendix 2: COSP Application Announcements.....		38
	General COSP Application Announcement	38
	ECCE Only Services COSP Application Announcement	40

Overview

The overall funding approach outlined in this document will cover the period of 1 February to 5 March subject to decisions by Government. Commitments to funding in any given cycle relate only to that cycle and do not give rise to ongoing commitments.

This FAQ document replaces previous versions relating to the January 2021 arrangements. The provisions within the January FAQ document expire on 31 January and are replaced by the provisions of this document.

Specific updates and revisions to this FAQ document may be made to provide additional detail as necessary and if further information becomes available.

As the decisions of Government change and evolve based on health advice and associated conditions impacting business and services across the State, DCEDIY will continue to direct and advise within the context of those decisions.

These FAQs may also be subject to further change within the parameters of Government decisions should a health or fiscal policy need arise.

1. What ELC/SAC services can operate from 1 February?

The resumption of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme has been postponed until 5 March 2021. Services that provide the ECCE Programme only or the ECCE Programme with an additional 30 minutes of childcare paid for by parents (hereafter referred to ECCE only services) will remain closed during this period. The changes to the funding arrangements are described in the funding section of these FAQs.

Other types of ELC/SAC services, including services that provide full day care, part-time day care, stand-alone school-age childcare services and childminders can continue to operate to provide ELC/SAC to:

- children who have a parent who works in an essential service; and/or
- vulnerable children.

2. What happens after this phase?

Given the uncertainty around the overall movement through Covid-19 related restrictions and the changing patterns of ELC and SAC usage, commitments to funding in any given cycle relate only to that cycle and do not give rise to ongoing commitments.

DCEDIY is committed to ensuring that overall investment in the sector is maintained and that services are sustained through this crisis. This may entail further adjustments on commencement of any changes to Covid-19 related restrictions or where it is necessary to better support ELC/SAC providers generally.

Conditions with regard to provision of funding for the period

3. What are the funding arrangement for this phase?

During this phase there will be different approaches to funding services depending on whether they are open or closed. Given the continued suspension of the ECCE Programme, services open during this period will continue to receive 70% of the value of ECCE programme funding and 100% of funding provided under other Department schemes. Services may also access 30% of ECCE funding and may also be eligible for Covid-19 Operating Support Payment. Eligibility and conditions of these payments is documented in these FAQs. ELC/SAC services continue to be entitled to access the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and all are encouraged to do so.

There will also be two streams of funding available: standard and enhanced payments. These are further defined below. The standard and enhanced payments reflect the need for DCEDIY to make certain adjustments to ensure the equitable distribution of funding to best support the sector. Such decisions are made with consideration to the totality of funding made available to the sector by the State.

Questions 3 to 18 set out the funding arrangements (in addition to the EWSS) according service type and circumstances.

An enhanced payment is available to those who sign up to certain terms and conditions. Those conditions are that providers must:

- During the period 1 February to 5 March, be open and providing ELC or SAC, or closed with permission of the Department or at the direction of the Government, Department or public health authorities;
- Not charge parental fees for the period 1 February to 5 March, for any children who are not attending the service, whether or not they are receiving subsidy under any of the following Department funding schemes – NCS, ECCE, CCSP and TEC;
- Maintain places for all children in the service, including those who do not attend between 1 February and 5 March;
- Make all reasonable effort to retain all of the staff in the service;
- Make all reasonable effort engage with children not attending the service; and
- Make all reasonable effort to engage staff who are not attending the premises to participate in continuing professional development or planning or administrative activities.

4. I am an open [full-time provider and/or provide a School Aged Service](#), what payments are available to me?

The following standard payments are available from DCEDIY:

- Continued payment for registered children of 100% of NCS, CCSP and TEC, whether those children attend your service or not from 1 February to 5 March 2021
- 100% payment for AIM
- 70% of the value of current ECCE registrations

In addition to the standard payments above, the following enhanced payments are available to service providers subject to agreement to the terms and conditions set out in Q.3:

- Payment of 30% of the value of current ECCE registrations
- A Covid-19 Operating Support Payment (COSP) for services that may have a high degree of reliance on parental fees (Q.13 addresses eligibility for this payment)
- Access to Sustainability funding where a requirement is established.

5. I am an open part-time or sessional service, what payments are available to me?

The following standard payments are available from DCEDIY:

- Continued payment for registered children of 100% of NCS, CCSP and TEC
- 100% payment for AIM
- Continued payment of 70% of the value of current ECCE registrations

In addition to the standard payments above, the following enhanced payments are available to service providers subject to agreement to the terms and conditions set out in Q.3:

- Payment of 30% of the value of current ECCE registrations
- Access to Covid-19 Sustainability funding where a requirement is established.

6. I am a closed full-time provider and/or provide a School Aged Service approved for Force Majeure and not directed to close by public Health, what payments are available to me?

The following payments are available to service providers subject to agreement to the terms and conditions set out in Q.3:

- Continued payment for registered children of 100% of NCS, CCSP and TEC
- 100% payment for AIM
- Continued payment of 70% of the value of current ECCE registrations
- A Covid-19 Operating Support Payment (COSP) for services that may have a high degree of reliance on parental fees (Q.13 addresses eligibility for this payment)
- Access to Covid-19 Sustainability funding where a requirement is established.

If the provider does not agree to the terms and conditions, no payments are available from DCEDIY, although they may continue to access the EWSS.

7. I am a closed [part-time or sessional provider approved for Force Majeure and not directed to close by public Health](#), what payments are available to me?

The following payments are available to service providers subject to agreement to the terms and conditions set out in Q.3:

- Continued payment for registered children of 100% of NCS, CCSP and TEC
- 100% payment for AIM
- Continued payment of 70% of the value of current ECCE registrations
- Access to Covid-19 Sustainability funding where a requirement is established.

If the provider does not agree to the terms and conditions, no payments are available from DCEDIY, although they may continue to access the EWSS.

8. I am a closed [full-time provider and/or provide a School Aged Service approved for Force Majeure based on a direction to close by public Health](#), what payments are available to me?

The following standard payments are available from DCEDIY:

- Continued payment for registered children of 100% of NCS, CCSP and TEC
- 100% payment for AIM
- Continued payment of 70% of the value of current ECCE registrations

In addition to the standard payments above, the following enhanced payments are available to service providers subject to agreement to the terms and conditions set out in Q.3:

- Payment of 30% of the value of current ECCE registrations
- A Covid-19 Operating Support Payment (COSP) for services that may have a high degree of reliance on parental fees (Q.13 addresses eligibility for this payment)
- Access to Covid-19 Sustainability funding where a requirement is established.

9. I am a closed [part-time or sessional provider approved for Force Majeure based on a direction to close by public Health](#), what payments are available to me?

The following standard payments are available from DCEDIY:

- Continued payment for registered children of 100% of NCS, CCSP and TEC
- 100% payment for AIM
- Continued payment of 70% of the value of current ECCE registrations

In addition to the standard payments above, the following enhanced payments are available to service providers subject to agreement to the terms and conditions set out in Q.3:

- Payment of 30% of the value of current ECCE registrations
- Access to Covid-19 Sustainability funding where a requirement is established.

10. I am an ECCE only service, what payments are available to me?

The following payments are available to service providers subject to agreement to the terms and conditions set out in Q.3:

- 100% payment for AIM
- Continued payment of 70% of the value of current ECCE registrations
- Access to Covid-19 Sustainability funding where a requirement is established.

If the provider does not agree to the terms and conditions, no payments are available from DCEDIY, although they may continue to access the EWSS.

11. What is an ECCE-only service?

The term “ECCE-only service” refers to services providing the ECCE Programme only or the ECCE Programme with an additional 30 minutes of childcare paid for by parents. Services that offer early learning and care or school age childcare for longer than 30 minutes in addition to ECCE are not ECCE only services.

12. What is the Purpose of the COSP?

In addition to the other supports available, the Covid-19 Operating Support Payment (COSP) is intended to support services that are very reliant on parental fees to remain sustainable during the period of high level restrictions, while meeting the condition of not charging fees for families whose children are not attending the service.

The payment seeks to enable services to support parents by not charging fees for children who are not attending, regardless of whether non-attendance is because their parents are not essential workers or because their parents have chosen not to use ELC and SAC services at this time.

13. What services are eligible for the COSP?

Eligibility for the COSP is determined on the basis of transparent, objective criteria, to support ease of administration for a scheme that is expected to operate for a short period of time. The criteria have been selected on the basis that they are likely to identify the services most reliant on parental fees.

It is acknowledged that some services that are reliant on parental fees may not meet the criteria – it is open to such services to apply for the Sustainability Fund if the service has sustainability concerns as a result of the current restrictions.

It is expected that 1,100 services will be eligible for the COSP, i.e. about a quarter of all Tusla-registered services.

Services are eligible for the COSP if they meet all of the following criteria. The criteria reflect the continued availability of the enhanced EWSS rates (which are estimated to meet 80% of payroll costs or 50% of operating costs), 100% continued funding of DCEDIY schemes for services that receive the COSP and avail of enhanced ECCE funding, and receipt of parental fees for children attending services that are open. Closed services have reduced operating costs. Criteria:

- The service must be Tusla-registered.
- The service must have at least one child registered on a DCEDIY funding scheme.
- The service must be reliant on parental fees for sustainability. Community services that currently receive significant State funding (other than EWSS) from non-DCEDIY sources (e.g. HSE, Tusla) for the childcare element of their organisation (used to support service delivery between 1st February and 5th March) are excluded from the COSP.
- The total value of DCEDIY funding schemes (ECCE, AIM, NCS, legacy schemes) allocated to the service in the week ending 13 December 2020 must be less than 45% of the ‘calculated-income-capacity’ of the service.ⁱ
 - The ‘calculated-income-capacity’ of the service is determined by the following formula:

Maximum number of children the service can accommodate (as specified on the Tusla Register).ⁱⁱ

x 83% (to reflect the average normal occupancy level, which takes into account both vacancies and the extent to which a place is only used part of the week, e.g. 4 days per week).ⁱⁱⁱ

x The average weekly fee in the county in which the service operates for the service type (distinguished by private/community, and session-type), as recorded in the Pobal Annual Early Years Sector Profile for 2020.^{iv}

For further detail, please see ‘Appendix 1: Case Studies’.

14. How is the payment calculated?

The COSP is intended to support the service's sustainability while not charging fees to parents whose children are not attending the service at this time. The amount is not intended to cover the full loss of income resulting from foregone parental fees, as eligible services may also receive:

- The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, which on average covers 80% of payroll costs, which on average amounts to 50% of operating costs.
- 100% continued funding of DCEDIY schemes for services. (Total State funding accounts for 58% of service income across the sector.)
- Fees from parents whose children are attending the service (with current average occupancy, at end January 2020, of 25%).
- Closed services have reduced operating costs.

The level of payment available to each eligible service is 20.28% of the difference between the service's 'calculated-income-capacity' and the total value of DCEDIY funding schemes (ECCE, AIM, NCS, legacy schemes) allocated to the service in the week ending 13 December 2020.

It is expected that the:

Average COSP payment will be €1,250 per week.

Largest COSP payment will be €7,800 per week.

15. I am due payment in the week ending 29 January, will I receive this funding?

All services (open and closed with permissions) will receive 100% payments for schemes other than ECCE and 70% of ECCE funding. The remaining payments will be subject to the conditions and process described in this document for accessing enhanced funding arrangements or for accessing funding on foot of force majeure permissions.

Closed services should note that that if they do not wish to sign up to the terms and conditions for funding as set out in Q.3 that this payment will be recouped.

16. How do I apply for the enhanced funding?

An application form is available on the Hive from 12 February to 26 February which enables providers to formally agree to the terms and conditions. Payment of an amount equivalent to 30% of ECCE and (where eligible) payment of the COSP will be made on foot of providers signing this agreement.

Closed ECCE only services should note that in order to continue to receive/retain funding for the period 1 February to 5 March it is a **requirement for ECCE only services** to complete and return this funding agreement before 26 February.

You are not required to apply for assessment of COSP eligibility. Services that meet the COSP eligibility criteria will receive a notification from Pobal that they are eligible for the COSP and that sets out the weekly amount they are eligible to receive in advance of this process.

In the event that you believe that an error has been made in the calculation of your eligibility or the level of payment, a review process will be made available. Details of this process will be made available by Pobal before the application process opens.

Further instructions on this process will issue from the scheme administrator prior to the opening of the application process. This process will apply to open services, ECCE only services and services which are applying for Force Majeure.

17. I have multiple services within my organisation and have consolidated provision, how are my services assessed for payment eligibility?

If children from the closed service are still receiving a childcare service, albeit in the different service then the service will be treated as open for the purposes of assessing eligibility of the payments described above.

18. What will the compliance/verification requirements be?

The Childcare Service must retain evidence of compliance with the terms and conditions of the enhanced funding Agreement. The Childcare Service shall allow access to relevant financial and other records for this purpose, and shall facilitate and co-operate with verification as required.

Records should be readily available for the purpose of visits in order to minimise any disruption to service provision. If onsite verification is not deemed practicable at the time of compliance checks then the service must produce such documentation upon request by emailing all requested documentation to Pobal to facilitate desk based checks as necessary.

19. What evidence/documentation will be required by the service to be retained for the compliance/verification checks?

Open and providing ELC and SAC and maintaining places for children not attending

- Retain evidence of correspondence sent to parents/ guardians/ sponsors informing them that the service will remain open for children of essential workers and vulnerable children
- Retain evidence of correspondence was sent to parents/ guardians/ sponsors informing them that places will be maintained for children not attending services for the duration of the Funding agreement

Parental Fees

- Retain evidence of correspondence (email/letter/text message) sent to parents/guardians outlining that they will not be charged fees from the period 1 February 2021–5 March 2021 for any children who are not attending the service, whether or not they are receiving subsidy under any of the following DCEDIY funding schemes – ECCE, NCS, CCSP and TEC.

Make all reasonable effort to retain all of the staff in the service

- Retain evidence of correspondence (letter/email/text) sent to staff indicating that they will be retained on payroll for the duration of the agreement
- Retain payroll records to be made available for compliance checks for the Programme year 2020/2021.

Make all reasonable efforts to engage with ECCE Children not attending the service

- Reasonable efforts to engage with ECCE children is very much a service by service approach. Some of you are engaging daily, some weekly. We will require for the purposes of compliance, evidence of at least one email/letter/text to parents/guardians of children attending ECCE in your service outlining useful resources to support and encourage children's interests in playing and learning at home.

Evidence of reasonable efforts to engagement with staff

- Evidence of reasonable efforts to engage with staff not attending premises should include at least one email/letter/text to your staff informing them of Continuing Professional Development activities and request that they complete a CPD course if possible.

Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

20. Will AIM funding be available to services during this period?

Yes. In line with current ECCE Programme provisions, those services continuing to receive ECCE Programme payments and that have approved AIM applications for Level 7 and Level 1 supports will continue to receive AIM payments for these Levels.

AIM Level 1 payments will be paid at 100% in February.

AIM Level 7 payments will be paid in full (100% of approved amount) to all services eligible for this payment. If Level 7 support funding was approved to buy in additional assistance but the staff member is no longer on the payroll e.g. on temporary layoff, etc. a Notification of Change must be completed and submitted to aimteam@pobal.ie

21. Will AIM payments change because of the decision to delay the resumption of the ECCE programme?

AIM Level 7 weekly payment rates have increased from €195 to €210 per week from the beginning of January. In order to bring AIM payments in line with ECCE Programme payments during this period, AIM pre-payments made on 8 January will cover the period up to the end of January. The following payment

due at the end of January will cover the period up to 5 March in line with ECCE payments. Providers may note that due to AIM level 1's integration with ECCE, this was paid in two tranches (70% and 30%).

Operation of ELC/SAC Services

22. What are the requirements for a service where a substantial majority of children are ECCE Programme only?

Where an ELC/SAC service is provided to one or more children funded through means other than through the ECCE Programme then that service may continue to operate for that child/those children only.

Where a service provides a preschool service for more than 3.5 hours per day then that service should operate if there is demand from parents of eligible children who are funded through means other than the ECCE programme. Where a service provides a school-age childcare service (of any duration), then it should operate if there is demand from parents of eligible children, with the exception of SAC Junior and Senior Infants 'link' service, as described in Q.23.

23. Am I required to open if I provide a Junior/Senior Infants "link" service?

A link service is a service providing a short period school aged childcare to junior/senior infant children finishing an hour before the end of the school day.

Where a service provides a school-age childcare service where the total time spent by every child does not exceed 1.5 hours per day then that service may close. Continued provision of subsidy will be conditional on agreement to the conditions associated with force majeure (see section on funding for closed services above).

24. I have more than one ELC/SAC facility and wish to close one facility whilst accommodating eligible children from the closed facility in another facility. Is this permissible?

In the first instance, you must seek the permission and agreement of the parents to move their children to another ELC/SAC location; it must not inconvenience them or cause unnecessary anxiety for the child or the family affected. In addition you must make a force majeure application and be approved to close the facility (see questions 56 to 60).

Should the parents agree and force majeure be granted, further information on the management of calendars, attendance and registrations within the affected service is available from Pobal.

25. How will families of essential workers and/or vulnerable children be supported to access ELC/SAC services?

For families who are entitled to funding under the National Childcare Scheme or support of CCSP/TEC, this support will continue to be provided on the basis of non-term-time hours from 1 February to 5 March.

Children who are considered vulnerable within the meaning provided in the section below on vulnerable children and children of essential workers will continue to receive funding which would include:

- NCS income-assessed subsidies
- NCS Universal subsidies
- CCSP and TEC legacy scheme subsidies

New applications for NCS continue to be accepted during this time. Arrangements are being made to enable children identified as in need of ELC/SAC to access sponsored places on an expedited basis.

Further information about applying for the NCS is available [here](#) and local City and County Childcare Committees can assist making arrangements for sponsored children. Contact details for each CCC are [here](#).

26. Are School-Age Childcare (SAC) services catering for SAC children during current restrictions required to support remote school-work?

During current restrictions, the primary consideration should be children's well-being and ensuring that their care needs are met. It has been agreed between DCEDIY and the Department of Education that there is no requirement that School-Age Childcare services will support school-work. If the service provides support with school-work, this should be in agreement with children and their parents/guardians.

Essential workers

27. Who is an essential worker?

An essential worker is someone who works in an essential service. The full list of essential services is available [here](#). For the purposes of accessing ELC/SAC, an essential worker may be working from home.

The levels of uptake of services among essential workers will continue to be monitored by the DCEDIY during this period and the conditions on children's eligibility to access services during this period will be subject to ongoing review.

28. Do both parents need to be essential workers?

No. If one parent is an essential worker, their child is eligible to access the service.

29. Is an ELC/SAC provider/staff an essential worker?

Yes, ELC/SAC is included in the list of essential services.

30. What should an ELC/SAC provider do if they have concerns that a parent is not an essential worker?

If an ELC/SAC provider has any concerns, they may, at their discretion, ask for a proof of employment, for example a letter from the parent's employer.

31. If an ELC/SAC service is required to prioritise amongst essential workers, who are the priority workers?

ELC/SAC providers are asked to ensure that a place is available for all children of essential workers within their service. As noted above the levels of uptake of services among essential workers will be closely monitored by the DCEDIY on an ongoing basis and the conditions of children's eligibility to access services during this period will be subject to ongoing review.

32. Am I expected to take in additional children of healthcare or other essential workers or children who are vulnerable?

It remains at the discretion of the provider whether they choose to take in new children. The ability to take in new children – whether short-term or long-term – is allowed by public health advice, and Q.49 below addresses how to include new children into the play pod structure.

The Department is aware of the needs of vulnerable children and the benefits of participating in ELC/SAC services at this time. The Department is also conscious that during this challenging period healthcare and other essential workers may have additional, unanticipated childcare needs, particularly as a result of the temporary school closures.

Information has been shared through the Department of Health and the Department of Education with healthcare workers and school staff about the existing options of contacting their local CCC for assistance in finding local childcare, and of getting subsidies through the National Childcare Scheme.

Vulnerable children

33. Who is a vulnerable child?

Any child who is subject to a sponsor arrangements under the National Childcare Scheme or under the CCSP legacy scheme are all defined as vulnerable children, but the definition is not limited to this group.

A provider may also assume a child to be vulnerable because of factors related to their personal development, features of their family life, or because of wider influences that impact on them within their community.

Some children who fall outside of the above categories may also be considered vulnerable for a range of reasons. Some of these reasons may include

- Children who experience family poverty;
- Children and families with complex support needs;
- Children living in households where there is domestic violence;
- Children whose families are significantly adversely affected by ill health or bereavement.

Providers are requested to make every effort to accommodate vulnerable children.

34. What is a Sponsor arrangement?

Children who are currently engaged in National Childcare Scheme (NCS) sponsorship arrangements are all defined as vulnerable for the purposes of determining eligibility to services during the period 1 February – 5 March. These categories are:

- Children who are in need of additional care and protection as part of the provision of child care and family support services by Tusla, and who are deemed by Tusla to require childcare services in order to promote their welfare
- Children whose families are receiving support under Meitheal
- Children known to the child protection system (level 2 or level 3)
- Children in care
- Children under 4 where a Child and Family Health Needs Assessment has been done by a Public Health Nurse and this has deemed the child to be in need of early intervention and require additional supports under child developmental needs, parental capacity and environmental factors, and where there is an identified need for childcare as an additional support to the home environment to meet the child developmental needs.
- Children of Programme refugees within the meaning of section 59 of the International Protection Act 2015 (IRPP applicants) to enable either parents or children to access education, integration and other relevant supports
- Children whose parents are homeless or moving out of homelessness
- Children of parents under 18 years of age so their parent may remain in education and training through access to childcare services.

Public Health

35. Why are ELC/SAC services being permitted to operate under the current Level 5 restrictions? The schools are closed, should ELC and SAC services close also?

Public health experts have confirmed that ELC/SAC services may continue to operate during the current Level 5 restrictions. While no environment is without risk in relation to Covid-19, and this has been the case throughout the pandemic, services can significantly reduce their risk level by closely following the expert guidance provided by the HSE, which was prepared specifically for ELC/SAC services by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC). It is also important to note that the incidence of Covid-19 positive cases in children 12 and under remains significantly lower than the population at large.

The Government has decided to delay the reopening of schools for most children in order to minimise the movement of people at a time of significantly elevated levels of infection of Covid-19 in the community. For the same reason, the resumption of the ECCE programme has been postponed, and ELC/SAC services will only be open to children of essential workers and vulnerable children only.

36. Is there a higher risk from the new variant of Covid-19? Reports from the UK suggest it spreads more easily and that infection rates in children are higher than other Covid-19 strains.

The situation with regard to the new variant of Covid-19 from the UK is being closely monitored. The most recent risk assessment from the European Centre for Disease Control states that the new UK variant has increased transmissibility compared to previously circulating variants. It is not clear whether that increased transmissibility applies across all the population age groups. There is no evidence to suggest that people become any more unwell with this new variant.

37. Are there new symptoms that ELC/SAC providers, staff and parents need to look out for? Has the advice on runny noses changed?

There are no new symptoms which ELC/SAC providers, staff or parents needs to look out for; however, you are advised to take a very precautionary approach where a staff member or a child or someone in their household or family unit is displaying **any** symptoms of Covid-19. They should not attend the service if they or the children are displaying symptoms. They should stay home and contact their GP.

If a child becomes newly unwell, such as with a runny nose, then a precautionary approach should be taken to observe them at home for 48 hours, to assess whether any further symptoms develop. Any symptoms of concern should be discussed with their GP.

38. Should ELC/SAC staff wear face coverings now?

The National Public Health Emergency Team recommends the use of cloth face coverings by people aged 13 years or older in certain indoor settings. This guidance is applicable to adults in childcare settings where it does not pose a barrier to care. **At all other times**, when not caring directly for children, **staff are required to use face-coverings** when a physical distance of 2m cannot, or may not, be maintained. This is particularly important when staff might be talking to one another in a room, moving around the facility e.g. for breaks / cover, or when sitting in designated break areas.

If staff wish to wear a face covering at all times, even when providing direct care to a child, they may do so. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has requested that, at least for the period until 5 March 2021, where staff choose to wear a face covering that ELC/SAC providers support them in their choice.

The DCEDIY is keeping public health guidance, including on wearing of face coverings, under review with the HSE. At this point in time there is no change in the public health guidance on wearing of masks in ELC/SAC services.

39. What about staff who are in a high-risk category or whose family members are high risk?
How can we protect them?

The [guidance](#) from the HSPC should be followed in relation to vulnerable people or those living with vulnerable people. If an at-risk or vulnerable worker cannot work from home and must be in the workplace, employers will make sure that they are preferentially supported to maintain a physical distance of 2 metres. It is recognised by the DCEDIY that, by its very nature, setting based ELC/SAC does not lend itself to remote working arrangements; however, employers should enable vulnerable workers to work from home where possible (e.g. administrative or support work). Where remote working cannot be facilitated then this should be discussed fully with staff members prior to them returning and any concerns considered and addressed by way of adjustments to their work where possible and if required.

It is important to remind all staff that the risk of infection can be reduced significantly by following up to date guidance on infection control, respiratory hygiene, hand hygiene and cleaning control protocols. Staff should also read in detail the Covid-19 Infection Prevention and Control [guidance](#) for services providing ELC/SAC during the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Return To Work Safely Protocol Covid-19 Setting Preparation Plan [Template](#).

40. Will close contacts in ELC/SAC services still be referred for testing?

The Public Health Pathway for ELC/SAC services and schools remains unchanged at present. Where a confirmed case has been in a service during the infectious period, public health will continue to work with the service to identify close contacts and advise on appropriate action to be taken. This will include testing of close contacts as required.

41. [Should staff and children attending services undergo routine testing?](#)

Public health advice is that neither staff nor children need to be tested for Covid-19 unless they are displaying symptoms or have been identified as a close contact and have been referred for testing. Staff and parents should be advised to take a very precautionary approach where they or someone in their household or family unit is displaying any symptoms of Covid-19. They should not attend the service if they or their children are displaying symptoms. They should stay home and contact their GP.

It is important to remember that no-one with symptoms of Covid-19 should attend for work. Undertaking a test e.g. private antigen test and obtaining a negative result is not sufficient to allow a staff member to work. Symptomatic staff should isolate and contact their GP.

42. Can the DCEDIY consider moving ELC/SAC staff further up the priority list for vaccinations?

The Covid-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and Department of Health, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for the Department of Health. The rollout of the Covid-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

Currently ELC/SAC staff are Priority 11 for vaccination, ahead of people aged 55-64 and workers in other occupations important to the functioning of society.

The aim of the Covid-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the immunisation programme is rolled out nationally.

The evidence will be kept under review and the allocation groups may be updated, where necessary, in light of new evidence. The DCEDIY continues to engage with the Department of Health and the HSE on the position of early learning and childcare practitioners on the vaccination list.

43. Are additional protective measures now required in ELC/SAC services?

The HSE has confirmed that there is no change to the public health advice for ELC/SAC services, which services have been following effectively since reopening in June to allow for their safe operation. In following the guidance at this time, the HSE strongly recommends that services, staff and families pay particular attention to two core areas:

- (i) **Exposures and symptoms (as explained in HPSC guidance) within the family unit of each staff member and child over the past week / 10 days.** It is crucial that if anyone within the family unit has any symptoms that could be consistent with Covid-19 that they self-isolate and contact their GP for testing. Anyone within that close exposure network should restrict their movements until the result is known. Young children should not under these circumstances be attending any ELC/SAC service. Further, if a young child has any symptoms that are evolving or uncertain, **there should now be a clear precautionary approach** and they should not attend an ELC/SAC service.

The HPSC guidance for symptoms and isolation requirements are available [here](#) and we would ask that all families and staff members attend to these and apply them **in a precautionary manner**. We ask that all ELC/SAC services themselves are clear on symptoms of concern for their staff or children and that all are clear on the isolation requirements in place, and that families are aware of the precautionary approach and low threshold being applied to ensure the safe continued opening of all facilities.

- (ii) **Re-focusing of all staff within services once the HPSC guidelines are being applied and implemented by staff and within the service.** HPSC guidance on safe opening are available [here](#) and we ask that all services go through the guidance carefully and with renewed focus to ensure that the recommendations can be applied in an appropriate rigorous manner. There will have been learning within each service over the past months on which aspects of the guidance have been more difficult to implement, and the renewed focus should be on these areas to ensure best solutions and protections are in place.

Particular focus should apply to **break times, staff rooms etc.** and ensuring strict social distancing is in place, with face-coverings worn by staff at these times and a focus on hand and respiratory hygiene. We ask that all staff and families pay very careful attention to national public health advice and recommendations, for the safety and wellbeing of all.

44. Is the public health guidance for SAC different from the guidance for ELC?

The same public health guidance applies to all ELC/SAC services.

45. What happens if there are suspected or confirmed cases of Covid-19 among staff or children in my service?

As you will be aware, the HSE has put in place specific arrangements for Covid-19 testing in schools and ELC/SAC services. The HSE reports that this Public Health Pathway has proved effective since its introduction in August. HSE Public Health teams for schools and ELC/SAC services remain in place and will clearly be focussed on responding to ELC and SAC services.

Weekly reports on mass testing in schools and ELC/SAC services can be found [here](#).

Some information to parents for situations where their child has been designated a close contact are available [here](#).

It is important to note that:

- Not all confirmed cases will require Public Health engagement with the service – for example if a case was not determined to be in the service during the infectious period, there may be no actions required.
- Departments of Public Health will contact services where a confirmed case is notified to them that may have implications for the service (e.g. the case was in the service during the infectious period and there is a risk of spread in the service). This will usually be the same day Departments are notified, but may occasionally be the next day.

46. Do I need to shut my service if a staff member or child is suspected to have Covid-19?

If a child or staff member in your service is displaying symptoms of Covid-19 they should leave or be collected from the service immediately. They or their parents/guardians should be advised to contact their doctor. Their doctor will arrange testing for them if they need it.

If they test positive for Covid-19, the ELC/SAC service will be contacted by local public health staff to discuss the case, identify people who have been in contact with them and advise on any actions or precautions that should be taken.

It is not necessary to take any action in relation to closing your service, partially or in full, until you have been contacted by and discussed the case with local public health staff.

You should follow the advice set out in the HPSC’s “Infection Prevention and Control guidance for services providing ELC/SAC during the Covid-19 Pandemic” in relation to cleaning rooms/services where there was a suspected or confirmed case of Covid-19. If a room is closed temporarily for cleaning and no other room is available, the staff/children using that room may have to leave the service until the room is available again.

47. What restrictions apply if someone returns from travel overseas?

Detailed advice from the Government regarding travel can be found at gov.ie, including specific guidance on travel from high risk “category 2” countries.

(<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b4020-travelling-to-ireland-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>).

48. In relation to the direction that services are safe to operate, are geographical factors being taken into account?

The advice from the national public health experts that services are safe to operate applies to all regions. All services are asked to closely follow the HPSC Infection Prevention and Control guidance to help reduce the risk of Covid-19 in their setting.

49. I have new children attending my service, can I assign them to existing play pods or do I need to create new play pods?

If there is room to add new children to existing play pods while ensuring compliance with regulatory adult : child ratios, services may do so. However, in some cases new play pods may need to be formed. In either case, once a child is assigned to a play pod they should, where possible, be consistently cared for in that play pod while attending the service under the current restrictions.

50. I have fewer children in my service at present, can I merge some of my play pods?

The public health advice remains that play-pods should be kept as small as can be reasonably practical in the specific childcare context. There is no requirement for services to restructure play pods in situations where demand is lower than before.

However, it is a matter for the service provider to decide how best to structure play-pods in the context of their own setting and taking account of the public health guidance and the regulatory adult : child ratios.

If it is not practical for a service to maintain existing play-pods (e.g. due to staffing pressures or if numbers in play pods are extremely low), services may consider merging some play-pods. Prior careful consideration of when and how to merge play-pods should occur, to ensure children's movements and mixing beyond their play-pods are minimised, and once merged they should be kept intact. Merging should happen on a 'once off' basis.

Any restructuring of play pods must fully comply with regulatory adult : child ratios. Children assigned to the new/newly formed play-pods should, where possible, be consistently cared for in those play-pods while attending the service under the current restrictions. You should also consider the assignment of staff to play-pods and ensure assignments are as consistent as possible with **movement between play-pods kept to an absolute minimum and occurring only where necessary.**

51. Can I merge play pods from different settings?

There is no requirement for providers to restructure play-pods or services where demand is low. However, it is acknowledged that it may not be practical to maintain existing play-pod structures with lower demand. Providers who are considering merging play pods from different settings should note Q.50 above.

From a public health perspective, providers who decide to merge play-pods from different settings should ensure that they are operating within the public health guidance and regulatory ratios. Prior careful consideration of when and how to merge play-pods should occur, to ensure children's/staff movements

and mixing beyond their play-pods are minimised. Any restructuring should happen infrequently and be organised to ensure continuity of staff and children within the play-pod.

52. I have moved some of my staff to shorter hours due to lower demand. Can I rotate the staff in my play-pods?

Play-pods are used as an alternative to social distancing in ELC/SAC settings and are designed to limit the number of people that children and adults have contact with in the service. Play-pods are also used to support contact tracing.

In this context it is important that the structure of the play-pod is maintained where possible. Rotation of staff should only occur where necessary and where it does not undermine the play-pod system. Staff who are assigned to a play-pod should work consistently with that play pod.

53. Some of my staff share accommodation and/or transport to work. Do they have to work in the same play pod?

Yes, the HSE has advised that where staff working in a service share accommodation or travel together to work they should be placed in the same play pod where possible. This will help to ensure that the play pod structure is effective and that there is no cross contamination of play pods due to interaction of staff from different play pods outside of the service.

Ongoing Engagement with ECCE Children

54. While the ECCE Programme is not operating, are there activities that staff should be carrying out?

During the period when the ECCE Programme is not operating, as a condition of ongoing funding service providers are required, insofar as possible, to

- Support and require, insofar as possible, participation in CPD activities for staff who are not currently delivering ELC/SAC services.
- Where possible, engage with children and families who normally take part in the ECCE Programme and other children who are not attending the service.
- Maintain a record of all efforts to support such participation in CPD and engagement with children and families.

(1) CPD

Until the ECCE Programme resumes, many practitioners will have an opportunity to undertake online training or development activities to help them meet the demands of their professional roles. Practitioners can choose any number of free online courses and resources that may suit their particular professional development needs. There is information on a number of courses on <https://first5.gov.ie/practitioners/continuing-professional-development>

Managers are asked to keep a record of their team's CPD activities using the form on the First 5 CPD page and to encourage their staff to keep records of their personal engagement with CPD.

Services can also use this time to review and revise their service policies and procedures. When reviewing policies, particular attention should be given to the Quality and Regulatory Framework eLearning programme linked on the First 5 page.

(2) Engaging with families

(1) Services are required insofar as possible to support engagement with ECCE and other children through their teams and to maintain records.

A preschool hub with free online resources will be available for practitioners on the First 5 website in the coming days. Services are asked to engage with all children and their families using the specialised knowledge of the children in your setting. This engagement might involve using the playing at home resources available on First 5 or for example through a daily zoom call.

Particular attention should be given to supporting children who avail of supports through the Access and Inclusion Model.

55. Should I also promote remote learning for non-ECCE children who are not currently attending my service?

ELC/SAC managers are asked to support remote learning for all non-attending children through their teams **where possible** and where it does not encroach on the care needs of children on-site.

A preschool hub with free online resources will be available for practitioners on the First 5 website in the coming days. Services are asked to engage with all children and their families to extend the playing at home resources available on First 5 using the specialised knowledge of the children in your setting. This engagement might be through for example a daily Zoom call.

56. Can I claim force majeure permission to close due to Covid-19 or for circumstances beyond my control e.g. access to school grounds where the service is normally provided?

Generally, force majeure applications are considered on a case by case basis, and are granted when a service closes due to circumstances outside of its control e.g. power blackout or local flooding, lack of access to premises or a regional or national severe weather warning under which people are asked not to

travel. Force majeure applications on such grounds will continue to be considered on a case by case basis. The force majeure application may be made for closure across a whole week or part of a week.

The closure of ELC and SAC services due to COVID-19 can be considered a Force Majeure situation. The Department is not obliged to make payments for ELC and SAC programmes under Force Majeure. Funding for services granted force majeure will be dependent on agreement to the conditions as described in the funding section of these FAQs.

Public health advice of 6 January is that it is safe for ELC/SAC services to operate. Therefore, force majeure permission will not be given where a service decides to close due to Covid-19 concerns, whether by decision of a Board of Management or by decision by an owner/operator, and where there is no direction to close by public health. This is to ensure that the children of essential workers and vulnerable children continue to receive ELC/SAC during this period.

Force majeure permission to close will be considered where staff shortages are asserted by providers. A staff shortage will only be considered for force majeure purposes where those shortages arise from Covid-19 infections or where staff members have been designated as close contacts, and where the service subject to the force majeure claim is rendered nonviable by the shortages. Correspondence from a doctor/HSE must be held by the service for potential verification of these claims.

It should be noted that from 11 January, schools should facilitate the opening of ELC/SAC services on their premises. The Department of Education has written to school Principals informing them that school buildings should remain accessible for essential services, including ELC/SAC services for the children of essential workers and vulnerable children. If any ELC/SAC service located on school premises is experiencing difficulties in accessing their premises during the school closure period, they should contact SACquality@equality.gov.ie

N.B. Providers seeking force majeure for the period 1/1/21 to 31/1/21 should refer to the January FAQs for guidance.

57. What should I do if I have no eligible children in my ELC/SAC service?

The service must contact all parents to ask if they have eligible children. If a service has no eligible children registered, or has no demand from the parents of eligible children for its services, the service should contact their CCC to inform them. A parent of an eligible child may decide on whether they wish to use their child's place on a weekly basis.

The service can apply for force majeure permission, and must confirm to Pobal that they have no eligible children registered in their service whose parents require ELC/SAC. In such cases, providers must maintain evidence of this. The conditions of funding as described in preceding question apply

The evidence must include a copy of a letter sent to all registered parents informing them that ELC/SAC is available for the children of essential workers and vulnerable children. Responses from parents indicating that their children are not in the eligible categories or that they do not require childcare must be held on the premises and be available for future compliance checks.

58. If I am open, will I lose NCS, CCSP or TEC funding for children who do not attend between 1 February and 5 March for any reason?

As long as your service is open and providing ELC/SAC for children of essential workers and vulnerable children, funding in respect of all other children under the NCS, CCSP and TEC schemes will be paid to services in accordance with the payment calendars and child registrations.

Registrations for children of essential workers and vulnerable children should be amended as they present in the service and if not already on non-terms hours then their registration should be amended to reflect current position. All other registrations should be left as they were in December and reported as such in the return to Pobal.

Services are reminded to submit their NCS attendance returns on the Hive following Pobal's instructions for this period, as that return is the trigger for their NCS payment. Providers will not be required to count the period 1 January to 5 March when assessing periods of non-attendance or under attendance. The period 1 January to 5 March will be treated as non-term; instructions on managing calendars and registrations for this period will be provided by Pobal, the scheme administrator.

59. I provide ECCE alongside other ELC/SAC services, am I required to confirm whether ECCE only families need a place?

You are not required for the purposes of closing under force majeure to make an offer and/or retain evidence of the offer for families whose children only participate in ECCE.

60. Can a parent of an eligible child who normally only attends for ECCE change their arrangement to take up additional hours?

It is open to you to allow families who would normally only access ECCE to change their arrangements in order to avail of ELC/SAC services other than the ECCE programme. In this case the ECCE portion of the fee should be deducted from parents' total fee.

61. What if I have sustainability concerns as a result of current restrictions in place on my service?

DCEDIY has established a Covid-19 sustainability strand as part of sustainability funding in place to support services with sustainability issues due to the impact of Covid-19 on attendance in a service. This is additional to the existing financial supports for services, including the EWSS and the COSP. Where a service has sustainability concerns as a result of the current restrictions, additional supports may be made

available under this fund to ensure services can continue to operate. Further details on this fund will be issued shortly. In the first instance, services with concerns are encouraged to get in touch with their local CCC.

Childminding and 'childminding bubbles'

62. Can childminders still operate?

Childminders (both regulated and unregulated) can operate on the same basis as centre-based ELC/SAC services i.e. providing services to the children of essential workers and to vulnerable children only.

63. Can grandparents or other relatives/close friends mind children?

A household of an essential worker can form a bubble with another household for the purpose of providing childcare. However, parents are asked to bear in mind the increased risk from Covid-19 for older people.

64. Are parents required to pay fees for January, if they cannot send their child in because they are/not essential workers, or the child is/not vulnerable?

The DCEDIY acknowledges that the relationship between a Childminder and parent is a private one based on a contract between those two parties. Therefore, it is advisable that the Childminder and parent discuss the terms of the contract in relation to the current Pandemic.

65. If a Childminder has a suspected or confirmed case of Covid-19?

If the Childminder or a child has symptoms of Covid-19 while in a service:

- The Childminder should have a small supply of surgical masks in a readily accessible place for use by them if someone develops symptoms of Covid-19.
- The Childminder should contact their emergency backup person and parents of the unwell child
- The Childminder should distance themselves or the child from the other children until the emergency backup person arrives.
- The Childminder should remove themselves or take the child to a designated area where the child can be isolated and attended to and stay with the child until the parent arrives.
- The emergency backup person should stay with the remaining children until their parents collect them.
- In an emergency, the Childminder should call the ambulance, and explain that the child is unwell with symptoms of Covid-19.
- The room will be cleaned and contact surfaces disinfected once they leave.

- If the affected person needs to use the bathroom whilst waiting for medical assistance, they will use a separate bathroom if available and it will be cleaned and contact surfaces disinfected before another person uses that bathroom.

Remember:

- Adults with symptoms or adults who need to care for a symptomatic child awaiting collection should keep as much distance as they can in the context of meeting the child's needs, be careful with respect to hand hygiene, avoid touching their face and wear a surgical mask, if possible. If a mask is not practical a visor may be suitable.
- In an emergency, call an ambulance

Confirmed Covid-19 cases should self-isolate at home for a minimum of 10 days with the last five being fever free and should not return to the childcare setting until they are advised that it is safe to do so.

A medical or doctor's cert is not required in order for a child to return to a setting. A verbal or written declaration from a parent will suffice. See sample declaration at Appendix 1 of the HPSC Guidance.

Close contacts of a confirmed case should restrict their movements for 14 days. They should not attend the childcare facility during that time.

If a child with Covid-19 cannot be isolated at home and there is an ongoing exposure risk, household contacts should restrict movements for 17 days from the onset of symptoms in the case (or date of test if the confirmed case was asymptomatic).

66. Are there financial supports for Childminders who are operating on reduced numbers as a direct result of current guidelines?

There are no financial supports for Childminders who have lower income due to reduced numbers in as a result of current guidelines.

Childminders who are no longer operating as a result of current guidelines may be eligible for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (if tax compliant).

For any queries regarding the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, please contact your local DSP office.

Parental Fees

67. Are parents required to pay fees during this period, if they cannot send their child in because they are not essential workers, or the child is not vulnerable?

It is the policy intention that parents who do not use a service during this time do not pay fees. In order to achieve this, a condition of waiving parental fees has been attached to a portion of the funding available to open services and all of the funding available to services that are closed with approval.

If providers access the conditional funding, parents are not required to pay fees.

However, if providers do not access the conditional funding, they may still request fees from parents. Contract terms between providers and parents may stipulate specific obligations of both parties. Providers are asked to bear in mind that parents have a broad range of personal circumstances in these challenging times and to consider what arrangements (e.g. refunds or fee credits) can be made for parents who do not wish not to take up an ELC/SAC place at this time.

The DCEDIY acknowledges that the relationship between a service and parent is a private one based on a contract between those two parties.

68. I provide the ECCE Programme as part of full or part time day care. How do I deal with ECCE fees for parents of eligible children who are attending for ECCE hours and additional hours?

Families of eligible children who normally attend for full or part time day care in addition ECCE hours should continue to have their ECCE proportion of their fees deducted.

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme

69. What is the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS)?

The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is an economy-wide enterprise support for eligible businesses in respect of eligible employees.

The scheme has two elements as follows:

- It provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers based on the numbers of paid and eligible employees on the employer's payroll; and
- It charges a reduced rate of employer PRSI of 0.5% on wages paid which are eligible for the subsidy payment.

Full details of the scheme are available on the Revenue Commissioner's website (<https://www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/ewss/index.aspx>). This material is updated from time to time and you should check for changes regularly.

70. Am I an eligible employer?

All ELC /SAC businesses registered with Tusla in accordance with Section 58C of the Child Care Act 1991 are included in the scheme with no turnover or orders test to be met.

Services must register for EWSS through ROS. This can be at any stage throughout the lifetime of the scheme. Registration applications will only be processed if the employer is registered for PAYE/PRSI as an employer, has a bank account linked to that registration, and has tax clearance. Where an employer files an EWSS payment submission without first registering for EWSS, it will be rejected in full. As registration cannot be backdated, it is imperative registration is undertaken prior to the first pay date in respect of which EWSS is being claimed.

71. What are the subsidy rates available?

Enhanced EWSS subsidy rates, which were introduced in response to Level 5 restrictions, will apply until end March 2021.

Enhanced subsidy rates are as follows:

Employee Gross Weekly Wage	Subsidy payable
Less than €151.50	Nil
From €151.50 to €202.99	€203
From €203 to €299.99	€250
From €300 to €399.99	€300
From €400 to €1,462	€350
More than €1,462	Nil

The enhanced EWSS subsidy rates provide approximately 80% of payroll costs for participating ELC/SAC services, which equates to approximately 50% of the usual operating costs of these services.

Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19 from DSP

72. What is the Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19?

When a worker is told to self-isolate / restrict movements by a doctor or the HSE due to being a probable source of infection or has been diagnosed with Covid-19 (Coronavirus) by a doctor, they can apply for an enhanced Illness Benefit payment of €350 per week.

All employees (other than some public sector employees who pay a modified rate of social insurance) and self-employed, including non-nationals and people living in Direct Provision, are entitled to claim and receive the enhanced Covid-19 Illness Benefit payment where conditions are met.

To be eligible for this payment a person must be confined to their home or a medical facility.

Phone your GP. Do not go to a GP surgery, pharmacy or hospital. The GP will assess you over the phone.

73. How do I qualify for the Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19?

To receive the enhanced payment, you must be:

- self-isolating/restricting movements on the instruction of a doctor or the HSE due to being a probable source of infection or diagnosed with Covid-19 (Coronavirus), and
- absent from work and confined to your home or a medical facility

An Illness Benefit claim form must be submitted (on line or by post) and a Certificate of Incapacity for Work must be provided by your GP or relevant HSE documentation provided.

To receive the enhanced payment, you must also be:

- aged between 18 and 66 years and

if employed

- have at least one paid qualifying social insurance contribution in the four weeks immediately before claiming the payment and
- have a contract of employment (if an employee)

if self-employed

- worked immediately before applying for the enhanced payment and will have reckonable income in the current contribution year

If you are ill for another reason and you can't work, you should apply for standard Illness Benefit. This requires a Certificate of Incapacity for Work and the submission of an application form (IB1).

Further information and details on how to apply are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/df55ae-how-to-apply-for-illness-benefit-for-covid-19-absences/>.

74. What is the rate of payment for the Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19?

The personal rate for this payment is €350 per week, as compared with the normal Illness Benefit rate of €203.

It will be paid for a maximum of 2 weeks where a person is self-isolating due to being a probable source of infection, and for a maximum of 10 weeks if a person has been diagnosed with Covid-19 (Coronavirus). If a person has been certified for less than 10 weeks, they will be paid for the duration of their certificate.

75. Does the DSP Covid-19 Illness Benefit apply if a Covid-19 test result is negative?

Yes, enhanced rates apply where the submitted Certificate of Incapacity for Work indicates a Covid-19 illness that includes one of the two specific ICD codes.

76. Can the DSP Covid-19 Illness Benefit be in respect of a shorter period than a week?

Yes, there are no waiting days applied to claims for the DSP Covid-19 Illness benefit. Payment of €350 per week will issue on a pro-rata basis where less than one week. Again this is dependent on receipt of the Certificate of Incapacity for Work that includes one of the two specific ICD codes.

77. Does the DSP Covid-19 Illness Benefit apply in the scenario where a GP decides it is not necessary for an individual to be tested/self-isolate but that individual may already have called in sick to work for a period?

No, payment for Covid-19 illness benefit claims is based on receipt of the Certificate of Incapacity for Work – with the relevant ICD code - and the IB1 claim application form. If a person is not required to self-isolate as a probable source of infection, the GP will not (should not) provide a Cert with the specified Covid-19 codes. When a person is ill the GP may, during their medical assessment, identify an ‘other’ illness/condition that necessitates absence from work and submit the Certificate of Incapacity for Work for that illness/condition. Claims should be made as soon as possible when a person becomes ill; however, claims may be accepted up to six weeks from the date of commencement of illness. The Certificate of Incapacity for Work for that illness/condition will not apply for the first 6 days of illness and will not apply the enhanced rates.

General information on the Covid-19 Illness payment is available at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/df55ae-how-to-apply-for-illness-benefit-for-covid-19-absences/>

Staffing issues and concerns

Updated guidance on HR was published on 12 February and is available at: <https://first5.gov.ie/userfiles/files/download/5be62f229d3de9ef.pdf>. More resources are available on the First 5 webpage.

Appendix 1: Case Studies

Case study (1)

Service (1) is a private full-day service in Cork City, registered for a maximum of 40 children. It has 21 children registered on DCEDIY funding schemes (17 on ECCE and 4 on NCS/CCSP-saver).

In the week ending 13 December 2020, it was allocated €1,364.25 in ECCE capitation and €807.33 in NCS/CCSP-saver subsidies, giving a total allocation of €2,171.58.

The service's 'calculated-income-capacity' is €6,964.36, calculated as follows:

40 (max children on the Tusla register)

Multiplied by 0.83 (i.e. 83%) to reflect average occupancy (incl. children attending fewer than 5 days per week)

Multiplied by the average weekly fee for full-day private services in Cork City (€209.77)

The service's DCEDIY funding allocation is **31%** of its 'calculated-income-capacity' (€2,171.58 divided by €6,964.36).

Service (1) is therefore deemed **eligible** for COSP.

The weekly COSP payment for service (1), if it accepts the COSP conditions, will be 20.28% of the difference between its DCEDIY funding allocation of €2,171.58 and its 'calculated-income-capacity' of €6,964.36 (the difference being €4,792.78). It will be eligible for a sum of **€971.98 per week**.

The total income excluding fees for children attending is expected to be (per week):

EWSS	€3,308 (estimated likely EWSS)
Schemes	€2,172
COSP	€972
<u>Income excluding parental fees</u>	€6,452

If the service has **occupancy of 3 children** (with parental fees of €629), i.e. an occupancy rate of 7.5%, it will cover its operating costs.

Case study (2)

Service (2) is a sessional community service in Kildare, registered for a maximum of 44 children. It has 25 children registered on DCEDIY funding schemes (all on ECCE). It does not offer school-age childcare.

In the week ending 13 December 2020, it was allocated €2,006.25 in ECCE capitation.

The service's 'calculated-income-capacity' is €2,311.72, calculated as follows:

44 (max children on the Tusla register)

Multiplied by 0.83 (i.e. 83%) to reflect average occupancy (incl. children attending fewer than 5 days per week)

Multiplied by the average weekly fee for sessional community services in Kildare (€63.30)

The service's DCEDIY funding allocation is **87%** of its 'calculated-income-capacity' (€2,006.25 divided by €2311.72).

Service (1) is therefore deemed **ineligible** for COSP.

The total income excluding fees for children attending is expected to be:

EWSS	€1,098 (@50% of operating costs, with operating costs 95% of income)
Schemes	€2,006
COSP	€0
Income <u>excluding parental fees</u>	€3,104

The service is making a surplus even with zero occupancy, and therefore is sustainable without charging non-attending children fees.

Appendix 2: COSP Application Announcements

General COSP Application Announcement

Covid-19 Operating Supports for the period 1st February - 5th March 2021

Dear Service provider,

The funding agreement for ELC/SAC funding measures covering the period 1st February – 5th March will be available on Hive from 10am today (Friday, 12th February) until close of business on Friday, 26th February.

All ELC and SAC services, including ECCE only services are requested to review the Frequently Asked Questions document <Link> to determine standard and/or enhanced funding levels available from February 1st to March 5th to and the terms and conditions of that funding based on the status and nature of your service (see questions 3 to 16 of the FAQs).

It is extremely important that you review the FAQs and are fully aware of the implications of signing/not signing this funding agreement for your service

Following review of this material, and in order to receive certain funding described in the FAQs you will be required to sign-up for the terms and conditions.

Please see also the funding agreement guidelines for further information and assistance.

Open/Closed Status including Force Majeure

To determine standard and/or enhanced funding levels, services must indicate on a weekly basis whether they are open or closed throughout the period 1st Feb – 5th March. If a service is closed, a reason must be provided and where necessary supporting documentation attached. Closure information will be reviewed and approved or declined as appropriate. This process will replace the current off-line Force Majeure for the week of submission only. Weekly Force Majeure due to lack of demand must be submitted on a weekly basis through normal processes.

Covid 19 Operating Support Payment (COSP)

Services eligible for COSP will be able to view their weekly COSP allocation as part of the contracting process. In order to receive COSP funding, eligible services must accept the terms and conditions of funding and if closed, have an approved closure period. (See Force Majeure above)

Services awaiting the outcome of a COSP review request, should not complete the contracting process until the review outcome has been finalised.

Payment Schedule

Services who have contracted by COB on Monday 15th February, and who have confirmed that they will be **open for all weeks** in the period, will be paid on Friday 19th February. Service Providers who have indicated closed weeks in the period, will require review and on approval will be paid in the subsequent weekly payment runs.

To ensure services are receiving funding as quickly as possible, payments will be issued on a weekly basis from 19th February onwards.

Further information on standard and enhanced funding is available [here](#).

Help and support

Should you have any queries in relation to the Covid 19 Operating Supports outlined above please contact the Early Years Provider Centre by raising a Request on Hive and selecting the following categories:

Request Type Detail: COSP General Query

Request Type: COSP

Programme Request: Covid 19 Supports

Many thanks,
Early Years Team

ECCE Only Services COSP Application Announcement

ECCE Only services – funding measures for the period 1st February - 5th March 2021

Dear Service Provider,

The funding agreement for ELC/SAC funding measures covering the period 1st February – 5th March will be available on Hive from 10am today (Friday, 12th February) until close of business on Friday, 26th February.

Please note that it is a **requirement for your service to continue to receive/retain funding for the period 1st February to 5th March** that you complete and return this funding agreement before February 26th.

The following payments are available to closed ECCE only service providers subject to agreement to the terms and conditions

- 100% payment for AIM
- Continued payment of 70% of the value of current ECCE registrations
- Access to Covid-19 Sustainability funding where a requirement is established

Please see the Announcement page of your Early Years Hive portal for further information and guidance.

Early Years Hive

Explanatory Notes

ⁱ While current occupancy in open services is 25% on average, it is acknowledged that it is lower in many services. With EWSS covering an average 50% of operating costs, services that are open and that receive more than 45% of their non-EWSS income from State funding can cover their operating costs with a very low level of current occupancy, while closed services face reduced operating costs. The COSP does not aim to support services – whether open or closed – that can already meet operating costs in the absence of parental fees.

ⁱⁱ The figure on the Register for the maximum number of children the service can accommodate is taken from the Register of Early Years Services, unless the service only offers school-age childcare, in which case the figure is taken from the Register of School-Age Services. If a service appears on both registers, the figure used is the figure on the Register of Early Years Services. To align with the data used for assessing funding (w/e 13 December 2020), the Registers used are those as of December 2020, which were published on the Tusla website in January 2021. Changes to the Register since December 2020 are not taken into account. The figure on the Register for the maximum number of children the service can accommodate is applied to the longest session type for which the service is registered. (If the service offers both ELC and SAC, it is treated as a full-day service.) So if a service is registered for both full-day and part-time provision and has a maximum number of children on the Register of 50, the COSP calculation assumes 50 full-time places, even if in practice some of the places may be part-time.

ⁱⁱⁱ Data from the Independent Review of Costs (Crowe, 2020) indicates an average occupancy rate across the sector of 83%. This figure takes into account both vacancies and the extent to which a place is only used part of the week, e.g. 4 days per week.

^{iv} The fee level applied is the average fee for the county in which the service operates, distinguished by whether the service is private/community and the longest session type for which the service is registered. (If the service offers both ELC and SAC, it is treated as a full-day service.) The table below presents the average fee data from the 2019-2020 Sector Profile (forthcoming).

Average weekly fee values by county, service type and session type 2019-20								
	Community				Private			
	Full day	Part time	Sessional	SAC (out of term)	Full day	Part time	Sessional	SAC (out of term)
Carlow	€145.83	€83.83	€67.71	€86.43	€161.75	€115.00	€76.34	€133.71
Cavan	€162.14	€84.29	€64.03	€134.85	€172.27	€107.50	€75.22	€142.50
Clare	€170.21	€94.58	€64.76	€89.40	€176.07	€116.93	€73.45	€134.75
Cork City	€187.95	€94.25	€73.16	€133.33	€209.77	€145.42	€79.01	€155.34
Cork County	€194.45	€110.45	€70.42	€156.97	€206.22	€117.67	€79.79	€173.60
Donegal	€171.00	€89.32	€60.77	€141.45	€168.93	€118.97	€72.48	€120.60
Dublin City	€188.15	€104.71	€70.67	€68.12	€225.95	€142.61	€82.93	€154.68
DLR	€190.38	€102.20	€70.73	€130.00	€246.66	€146.05	€89.85	€160.70
Fingal	€202.00	€100.67	€73.29	€133.75	€222.72	€132.72	€76.43	€163.07
Dublin South	€190.71	€97.67	€67.84	€109.33	€222.37	€141.38	€78.80	€137.96
Galway	€157.17	€91.47	€65.36	€104.28	€171.85	€106.10	€72.99	€141.02
Kerry	€181.60	€89.85	€58.89	€102.69	€178.91	€114.63	€74.18	€154.00
Kildare	€172.50	€100.00	€63.30	€83.88	€196.60	€121.77	€78.72	€132.95
Kilkenny	€173.00	€95.44	€69.15	€130.56	€170.59	€110.21	€74.39	€145.40
Laois	€149.67	€73.75	€62.91	€35.39	€176.22	€121.50	€74.88	€162.93
Leitrim	€155.00	€83.88	€62.71	€121.83	€130.00	€87.50	€74.36	€70.49
Limerick	€167.80	€83.88	€65.14	€95.00	€176.87	€112.66	€76.31	€134.00
Longford	€159.17	€86.67	€65.05	€89.87	€159.00	€101.67	€78.36	€108.00
Louth	€170.28	€86.39	€65.85	€65.49	€176.73	€114.96	€74.06	€142.42
Mayo	€150.71	€109.90	€63.71	€99.67	€169.68	€112.92	€73.01	€120.33
Meath	€170.00	€86.75	€66.04	€117.89	€188.82	€116.16	€75.50	€164.50
Monaghan	€153.58	€87.57	€64.47	€111.56	€145.07	€87.63	€68.39	€126.70
Offaly	€165.00	€102.50	€60.86	€150.00	€176.10	€115.44	€75.10	€123.37
Roscommon	€151.00	€85.24	€66.34	€127.43	€167.77	€103.25	€73.02	€150.74
Sligo	€167.25	€91.83	€65.33	€137.71	€161.54	€116.00	€81.68	€137.81
Tipperary	€158.67	€99.06	€67.38	€97.51	€158.04	€100.55	€73.06	€127.37
Waterford	€170.14	€92.89	€62.32	€87.20	€165.94	€110.23	€74.96	€95.63
Westmeath	€177.00	€85.50	€63.67	€163.33	€176.49	€114.50	€75.39	€139.81
Wexford	€181.50	€89.32	€71.66	€78.70	€172.89	€113.23	€77.86	€164.06
Wicklow	€160.00	€87.67	€66.93	€117.50	€216.03	€127.83	€80.61	€152.33

^[1] Average weekly fees are based on data from 2,452 services, representing 54% of all services with an active DCEDIY contract for the 2019/2020 programme year.