



REOPEN SAFELY, RECOVER SUSTAINABLY

**A PROPOSAL FOR REOPENING AND
SUSTAINING EARLY LEARNING AND FULL DAY
CARE (ELC) PROVISION IN IRELAND**

29 MAY 2020



INTRODUCTION

The Early Learning and Childcare (ELC) sector delivers an essential service that is key to supporting the economy, enabling parents to access employment and training opportunities whilst providing high quality childcare and education to our youngest children.

Independent full day care ELC providers employ 18,000 ELC professionals and other staff, and care for over 144,000 children in Ireland.

We ensure these children have high quality learning and social experiences that enrich and equip them for later childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. More broadly, it is an enabler to employment, creating more opportunities for and contributing to economic growth.

The Covid-19 lockdown has been challenging for us as a society, but it is undeniable that the closure of independent ELC services has had profound effects on Ireland's children and for many parents, on their workplace productivity. The daily routine, learning, and socialisation that our children experience at their childcare services has been suspended since March 2020 and we must ensure that their well-being is central to our re-opening strategy.

Ultimately, a functioning high-quality childcare sector is key to a functioning economy. The lockdown during this public health pandemic has shown that even with the most valiant effort, parents cannot double-up as full-time carers and educators and full-time employees.

Reopening safely

ELC services are in a good position practically to reopen and our members have been consulting and planning diligently for it. The sector has inherent advantages. Firstly, virtually all (96%) of ELC centres in Ireland have access to an outdoor space, which can and will be utilised as much as possible, facilitating and encouraging social distancing where possible.

Secondly, the profile of the ELC workforce is of a predominantly younger age group with almost three-quarters being under 45 years of age, which places them among the lowest-risk groups for suffering a severe Covid-19 infection.

More can and is being done to prepare for re-opening the sector safely in line with public health guidelines. Service providers understand the importance of reopening gradually and safely. To that end, many are considering and planning how they can invest in increased infection control and hygiene measures, PPE and other safety equipment. Staggered opening hours may be required initially, and capacity will be significantly limited as services re-open on a phased basis in line with the Government's roadmap for reopening the economy.



In addition, there is currently little evidence to support that younger children are at risk of contracting Covid-19, however, a measured and cautionary approach will be adopted as centres reopen. All childcare providers will work closely with partners in Public Health, Tusla and other Government agencies to work within agreed guidelines to prevent the spread of infection.

Business realities

A phased re-opening and a revised operating model for childcare will have significant implications for the financial sustainability and viability of services in the longer term.

The current business reality is that ELC service providers are being asked to re-open at a loss. The majority will face a hard struggle; many will delay opening until later in the summer or simply stay closed permanently. Retaining qualified staff on reduced capacity whilst meeting fixed overhead costs is our number one challenge.

It is expected that demand will be considerably reduced as centres gradually re-open from 29 June 2020 for the children of essential workers. Fewer children results in less revenue. This makes it impossible for childcare service providers to meet fixed costs such as mortgage repayments and rent.

These would be difficult challenges to tackle under the best of circumstances, but it is a fact that Ireland's independent ELC sector is already beset with very high costs as a highly regulated sector so any new operating requirements and protocols will incur considerable increased costs and providers will require additional support.

Ensuring on-site safety requires investment. PPE and daily deep cleaning and increased infection control measures are expensive, while items that would have previously been shared, like art supplies and educational equipment, additional resources will be required to decrease the risk of Covid-19 transmission.

Covering these costs, especially with the lowest state subvention rate of any country in the EU, results in Irish parents paying far more for ELC services than their European counterparts.

Government supports

We anticipate an occupancy level as low as 20%, or one in five children, as we prioritise the children of essential workers.

This will have a significant impact on childcare providers, many may not reopen in the Summer and could possibly close. A shortage of independent ELC providers will have knock-on effects on Ireland's ability to restore the economy and to provide childcare and early education for children.



The Government can ameliorate this situation now. Seas Suas proposes a Cross-Government Reopening Support Package that provides independent ELC centres the financial and economic stimulus they need to reopen and stay open.

These include rapid testing and results for childcare professionals, the abolition of commercial rates on creches providing full-time day-care facilities (to include property rates/ water and wastewater rates as is the case with the school sector), and further support through the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) as childcare services re-open on a phased basis.

In line with this, we are calling on the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure to join the talks to support the sector and to input into planning for its reopening. The recovery process is a national one and the childcare sector cannot move in silos from the rest of country's economic planning. Without cross-departmental consideration and commitment, we risk falling at the first hurdle – a risk that many childcare providers cannot and will not take.

Ultimately, the return for investment in independent, quality ELC centres is threefold: some normality is restored for the children who can return to the familiarity of their usual childcare service, the immediate and long-term viability of the sector is protected, and the overall economy benefits.

The more parents who have childcare provision at creches, the more can return to work.

We look forward to discussing these proposals with our associates and colleagues in Government and industry in the weeks ahead.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Regina Bushell".

Regina Bushell
Chair, Seas Suas

REOPENING SAFELY

In the Government's roadmap for reopening, the proposed timeline for childcare provision is:

- From 29 June 2020, ELC services may re-open for children of essential workers on a phased basis.
- From 20 July 2020, ELC services may reopen for all children on a phased basis

In addition to the 32 recommendations set out below, we continue to work with our providers to plan for the resumption of their services. As a member of the Advisory Group on Re-opening Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare Services, established by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, we continue to engage and consult to reach solutions in a timely manner.

Together with the official guidance from the National Public Health and Emergency Team (NPHE), the Government, and through the DCYA Advisory Group, we are committed to the safe reopening of services to support the return to work and ensure we continue to stop the spread of Covid-19.

32 KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SAFE REOPENING OF ELC CENTRES

We face a number of specific and immediate challenges and we have grouped our 32 recommendations under the key and primary areas for consideration, which are as follows:

- All children would like a return to their normal daily schedule and to recommence their learning and education in their ELC settings.
- Parents require quality ELC provision to enable them to work and to support the re-opening of our economy – it is clearly evident that childcare is an enabler of economic activity.
- The future viability and sustainability of ELC provision in Ireland is at risk. If childcare care centres do not open with an agreed support package in recognition that they are not operating at full capacity, some will not reopen and may even shut down, causing job losses.

We can reopen safely. This sector is already highly regulated, and the highest standards of health and safety are already in place. We accept all processes need to be adjusted and we can and will adjust them. Working with advice from NPHE, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Advisory Group, we can do this in the following ways:

Health and Safety

1. Each provider would have in place a dedicated Covid-19 safety statement, with updated policies, procedures, and risk assessments based on the official public health guidance.
2. Providers would appoint an internal Covid-19 officer or centre manager to implement and monitor progress and risk against the agreed and revised health and safety plans.
3. A universal, clear plan of action to manage an incident of Covid-19 in childcare settings, which has been agreed by all, providers and Government, should be put in place, to include risk level and public health implications.
4. Access to dedicated Covid-19 testing and results (within 24-hour period), along with dedicated contact tracing for childcare sector should be provided.
5. A Covid-19 child-friendly 'education pack' would be developed by providers to explain the measures to children and to demonstrate sneezing and coughing etiquette.
6. Staff will supervise the children washing their hands regularly, a minimum of every one to two hours, including after coughing or sneezing, before and after food and after garden time.
7. Cleaning stations would be increased, with access to hand sanitisers.
8. Staff and children's temperatures would be monitored on arrival and handwashing completed prior to entry.
9. Close monitoring such that children who present with symptoms are evaluated and sent home where necessary in line with a revised sickness and exclusion policy
10. Assurances and a clear plan to ensure access to PPE should be guaranteed for the sector.
11. Isolation room in service in the case of an outbreak and use of PPE by staff
12. Cleaning would take place regularly throughout the day with a deeper clean at the end of the day. Items and objects to be cleaned and disinfected include toys, and surfaces such as taps, toilet flushes, tables, door handles, handrails, light switches etc.

Social Distancing

13. Space and ratio restrictions are not necessary because social distancing among children will not work; it is not something that children understand and it is not conducive to their well-being, play and social interactions.
14. From 20th July, occupancy could increase based on parental demand; weekly reviews of child and staff well being carried out as occupancy increases
15. Social distancing would be observed among staff, including staggered breaks
16. Social distancing would also be observed among parents with plans for the safe drop-off and pick-up of children

Capacity

17. In line with Government guidance, there is no requirement to reduce capacity, however providers may consider managing occupancy and increasing child numbers on a phased basis in line with the Government roadmap and increasing parental demand
18. Staffing levels must also be considered to support centres increasing occupancy

Returning Children

19. Specific spaces within centres would be assigned to each pod (each friendship or key carer group), whilst the use of internal communal spaces would be limited.
20. Overall, children to play with the same small groups of children, utilising outdoor spaces as much as is possible
21. Access to centres would be controlled and managed for parents, visitors and contractors
22. Hand sanitiser to be available in every room, toy sharing will be limited, and toys frequently washed.
23. Consider familiarising children with staff using PPE and use pictorial aids to involve them in understanding that adults are wearing masks etc prior to returning to their centre.
24. It is vital that children and their parents visit their centre before-re-opening: Settling in arrangements require one to two weeks to re-establish connections and parents would also like reassurances about their child's well-being and revised operating protocols.

Staffing

25. Provide universal staff training on Covid-19 protocol and roles and responsibilities in managing risk within services, which can be delivered in-house
26. Clear guidance on the management of staff returning from overseas and the oversight of self-isolating arrangements is required.
27. Return to work protocol to be put in place for staff to include a health declaration and travel survey - staff members would be required to complete both in advance of returning to work
28. Social distancing to be observed by staff and all staff meetings to be held outside or via telephone/video call.
29. Support should be provided to facilitate employees who travel to work by public transport, (Consider disposable face masks, disposable gloves and request staff members change clothing on arrival)

Parent Communication

30. Research among parents is already under way to better understand their children requirements and to assess childcare demand based on revised work patterns and economic downturn to fully inform planning.
31. A national communications campaign should be implemented to inform parents of the detail and measures in place in childcare centres to provide further reassurance with regard the safety of services.
32. Such a campaign should also outline the precautions parents can take at home and at childcare centres to support providers in creating a safe environment for children, parents and staff.

RECOVERING SUSTAINABLY

ELC services have been closed nationally since 12 March 2020. For a period of up to 15 weeks, there have been zero income while fixed costs such as rent and mortgage repayments still have had to be paid.

Many providers now find themselves with a difficult choice:

- Re-open to provide childcare from 29 June 2020 at a considerably lower and unsustainable occupancy of an approximate 15% occupancy up to a maximum of 25% with increased costs (more staff, longer opening hours, intensive and frequent cleaning) and less income; or
- Choose not to re-open until later in the summer, possibly August or September.

Staff costs comprise up to 70% of total costs with the balance of costs being largely fixed and relating to premises and utilities.

The understandable health concerns created by Covid-19 means that an ELC service which had full occupancy pre Covid-19 is now anticipating as little as 20% occupancy demand for the immediate period which will impact our ability to provide a viable childcare service.

The stark challenges faced by ELC providers have similarities to other sectors of Irish commercial and social life which have been so forcibly impacted by Covid-19. However, where childcare providers do occupy a singularly unique role is the fact that the services we provide are central if all of us, economically and socially, are to start to meaningfully return and recover.

Working people in every sector and those of us who depend upon the services they provide need a safely functioning childcare sector to drive the recovery. The compelling impact on everyday life when there is no one available to mind our children has been clear to see in recent times, not just in healthcare and other essential services, but in every sector.

Much of the country's childcare needs are met by private childcare providers. If the 3,200 privately owned providers are not in a position to work, neither can large swathes of the population.

Thousands of parents will not be able to return to work (remotely and/or in work settings) or reopen their own businesses if they cannot find quality, safe, affordable, and reliable ELC for their children. If ELC providers are allowed to go out of business, we risk blunting the ability of the economy as a whole to recover and permanently reducing the supply of childcare in this country.



For Ireland to get back to work, it needs a whole of government response that looks beyond just the next five weeks.

A CROSS-GOVERNMENT REOPEN SUPPORT PACKAGE

Seas Suas is calling for a Cross-Government Reopen Support Package for the ELC sector.

The Fiscal Advisory Council has this week (27 May 2020) recommended the Government provide a 'sizeable fiscal stimulus' to help support activity during the recovery phase. Its view is that through a targeted, phased boost of investment to the economy, we can help ease businesses suffering low demand in the initial reopening phase and support them up to full capacity.

In line with their advice, Seas Suas proposes that such a package includes a blend of immediate and medium-term measures that enable providers to viably function and thus allow the country as a whole to get back to work.

Such short-term measures will have an instant effect and are required to ensure the medium- and longer-term sustainability and viability of ELC provision in Ireland.

Such a package needs input and commitment from all sides of the sector now, if we are to feasibly approach 29 June with workable solutions for our children and parents. This commitment must include the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure without delay, if it is to be robust, sustainable and supported by the sector.

The measures we are seeking for this cross-Governmental reopening support package are:

▪ DEPARTMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH AFFAIRS

We are seeking operational supports to include:

- Tapered funding to support with staffing costs – the sector will require further support through the Wage Subsidy Scheme (WSS) as childcare services re-open on a phased basis.
- Reinstatement of pre-existing ELC funding contracts for the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) and ECCE free pre-school scheme.
- Financial supports to facilitate the implementation of increased Infection Control and Health and Safety protocols.
- Support with staff training to comply with official Covid-19 guidelines for childcare facilities.

▪ DEPARTMENT OF FINANCE AND DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC EXPENDITURE AND REFORM

We are seeking financial supports to include:

- Immediately appoint the Minister for Finance/Public Expenditure and Reform to the ELC re-opening taskforce. Without the active involvement of the paymaster, financial considerations will continue to be periphery to the group and well-intentioned measures which require funding will not be deliverable.
- Redirect extend and increase the recently secured fund for the ELC sector as announced by Minister Zappone on 6 May. The fund – which equates to €4.2 million per week – has not been taken up as intended.
- Meanwhile, it is estimated that services will be at 20% occupancy when they reopen on 29 June for the children of essential workers which is an unsustainable operating model. Without delay, this fund should be:
 - o Redirected to ELC providers;
 - o Extended for up to 12 months to meaningfully address the crisis;
 - o Create a support model that is tailored to meet the shortfall between demand and breakeven for those providers to reopen and stay open. The model can be designed on a reduced sliding scale to reflect the increase in demand for ELC services in line with a recovering economy, with a starting point of capacity at February 2020;
 - o Increase the fund to a meaningful level to have the desired impact.
- Given staffing costs - which will be greater as a result of safety measures - currently account for up to 70% of total costs, the Government should also extend a form of the WSS to ease the immediate pressures of getting staff back into the work place and the opening up of centres over the initial period.
 - o The support would operate in tandem and cover: staff members that are now required who would previously have been surplus to ratio requirements; and staff members who are not yet required due to reduced occupancy levels.
- State supports for overheads and business input costs and access to low or no interest rates for SMEs to share the burden.

▪ DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING PLANNING AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

We are seeking supports to include:

- Abolish commercial rates on ELC services providing full-time day care services, as is currently the case for ECCE-only facilities and primary and secondary schools in Ireland.



▪ DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

We are seeking supports to include:

- Providing rapid testing and results for childcare professionals (both existing and new staff) from abroad who will return to Ireland to work.

Staff turnover rates are in excess of 25%, and the sector is reliant on overseas staff; the 14-day isolation requirement will pose a challenge.

▪ REVENUE

We are seeking supports to include an employers' PRSI holiday on staff costs.

▪ TUSLA

As the State agency with responsibility for child protection and welfare, we are seeking supports to include:

- A commitment to work with the sector on our regulatory obligations to temporarily reduce the burden, while upholding our strong principles of delivering quality safe services in the best interest of our children.
- Tusla to operate in a support and advisory capacity during the phased re-opening timeframe
- Recognition of the need to take a workable and joined-up approach to implementation and enforcement of regulation during this period to provide clarity, consistency, and confidence in the sector that the new measures taken will be accepted and upheld.

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