



27th May 2020

Dear provider,

I am writing to give you an update on my Department's progress on the development of plans to reopen early years learning and care services. I want to thank you all for your patience in these difficult times. I am happy, however, to tell you that planning is well underway for service reopening, in accordance with the Government's Roadmap on the Reopening of Society and the Economy.

My Department is preparing a plan for the reopening of the early learning and care sector, and we are being advised by the HSE and HAS, as the health and wellbeing of children, practitioners and providers are our key concerns.

I hope to bring a report to Government shortly, setting out my proposals for service reopening. In developing these proposals I have been aided by the Advisory Group on Reopening. I established this group to ensure that we can have a concentrated, focused consultation mechanism with the childcare sector, to ensure that your concerns and needs are to the forefront of our decision making.

In establishing the Advisory Group, I provided six places for sectoral representatives. The sector itself decided on the nominees and these include representatives from the Association of Childhood Professionals, PLÉ, Seas Suas, Early Childhood Ireland, the National Childhood Network and the National Community Forum. Many of these groups represent providers. I included Childminding Ireland and SIPTU as members of the group, as they represent key parts of the early years' sector not included in the list above, i.e. childcare staff and childminders.

A number of additional provider representative groups have recently contacted my Department seeking to be added to the membership of the Advisory Group. In response to such requests, I have established a Reference Group, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group. The Reference Group includes representatives from the Federation of Early Childhood, the Association of Full-time Day care Providers, St Nicholas Montessori and a number of multi-site service providers. I will chair the first meeting of the Reference Group on 28 May.



In addition to the above, as you are aware, my officials are also engaging directly with all 4,500 providers across the country through regular emails, and are seeking your input to COVID related challenges through a survey of all providers and an open call for submissions. I would encourage all of you to contribute to these consultations.

You will see that there are two attachments to this letter, and I want to briefly explain them to you.

Letter to providers from the Secretary General

The first attachment is a letter to providers from Fergal Lynch, the Secretary General of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs. This letter explains that services will need to reopen to staff only, in advance of reopening for children, to allow for preparatory work to be carried out. The purpose of this letter is twofold – for you to copy to your insurance broker when you inform them that you will be reopening your service for staff, to make preparations for re-opening for children, and also for you and your staff to present to any members of the Gardaí who ask why you or your staff are present in your service, or ask why you are travelling to it.

Guidance for reopening services

The second attachment is a document ‘Key principles underpinning practice when reopening early learning and care and school-age childcare services during COVID-19’.

This paper sets out the central principles that should underpin practice in early learning and care and school-age childcare services during the COVID-19 period. This current version is based on the latest public health advice available (as of 27 May) which is subject to review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and ongoing review/updating by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) in the HSE.

If the public health advice changes, this note on the Principles Underpinning Practice when Reopening may change. I am issuing this to you now because I am cognisant of your request for such information as soon as possible.

DCYA is currently developing detailed guidance for service providers, in consultation with the HPSC/HSE, child psychologists and Tusla. A schedule of guidance / supports that will be provided to services before reopening appears at the end of this note.

DCYA updates

I would also like to take this opportunity to update you on some recent issues, which should be of interest to providers.



Insurance

Allianz, the main insurance underwriter for the childcare sector, has agreed that there will be no Covid-19 exclusion on insurance policies for services which reopen from 29 June, under the Government Roadmap. All covers will be in place as per their existing policies, provided they follow the guidelines and back to work protocols issued by the relevant authorities. Arachas, the broker for the childcare providers' group insurance scheme have advised DCYA that, from the insurance point of view, there should be no barrier to the re-opening of Childcare services on the 29th of June. The Department has sought information from the other insurance brokers who provide services in the childcare sector, and we are awaiting updates from them.

PSP

The Programme Support Payment for the 2019/20 Programme year will issue in June this year, as is normal. Pobal are preparing the application process, and will contact all providers via PIP to let you know when the applications will open. Providers will receive their PSP payments before the end of June.

Capital Programme

I suspended the 2020 Capital Programme in March, due to the Covid pandemic. I will shortly launch a new, replacement Capital Programme, to provide capital funding to services which will be reopening in the coming months. Work is underway in the Department and Pobal to design the application system, and to set out the application criteria. The application system will be a simple and user friendly. Funding will be available to providers in advance of the purchase of equipment or the carrying out of works. Further information will issue in early June.

I realise that some providers put considerable work in preparing submissions for the planned 2020 Capital Programme. I hope that they can understand that, in these unprecedented times, there are other, more urgent capital requirements. I would hope that these plans do not go to waste, but can be used for applications for capital programmes in future years.

Finally, I realise that these have been very difficult times for the early years' sector. Please be assured that I am committed to the future sustainability of the sector, and the essential work that you all do in supporting children and their families.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Katherine Zappone,
Minister for Children and Youth Affairs