

Safety for children, childcare professionals and parents

1. Are childcare services safe?

Public health experts have confirmed that it is safe for early learning and childcare services to operate. NPHET have advised the Government that the incidence of Covid-19 positive cases in children 12 and under remains significantly lower than the population at large. Childcare settings remain safe environments for children and staff. Restrictions and closures are in place as part of the wider national effort to reduce movements and dramatically reduce opportunities for the virus to spread.

2. Will there be restrictions on how childcare is managed within centres?

No additional measures are required at present.

The advice from the national public health experts is that no change is required to the Infection Prevention and Control guidance for settings providing ELC/SAC during the pandemic. Services have been following this guidance effectively since reopening last June and it has helped to minimise risk of spread of infection within settings. As a consequence the incidence of Covid-19 within childcare settings has remained very low.

The Department, in conjunction with the HSE, will keep this under review and will update as appropriate.

3. 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.

4. Are there new symptoms which service providers, staff and parents need to look out for? Has the advice on runny noses changed?

Services, staff and parents 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.

What childcare services are open, which are closed, and how do I know whether or not to send my child?

5. Closed services

Services that only operate the ECCE Programme will be closed.

6. Open services, and which children should attend them

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

These services are currently only open to **eligible children**. Eligible children consist of:

- children who have a parent who works in an essential service^[1] and
- vulnerable children. Vulnerable children are described below.

7. If parents who work in essential services or parents of vulnerable children wish to avail of additional hours of provision or access a new service, can they do so?

Yes, but this is subject to availability and agreement with provider.

8. Why is the ECCE Programme not resuming for January?

The rationale for not resuming the ECCE programme is to reduce movement, in line with public health advice. Other provision remains open to enable essential workers to continue to do their job and provide valuable services to vulnerable children.

Understanding 'essential worker'

9. What is an essential worker?

An essential worker is someone who works in an essential service. The full list of essential services is available [here](#). An essential worker may be working from home.

10. Do both parents need to be essential workers?

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

Understanding 'vulnerable children'

11. Who is a vulnerable child?

Children who are currently engaged in NCS sponsorship arrangements are all defined as vulnerable for the purposes of determining eligibility to services during the period 11 to 31 January. 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

^[1] A list of essential services at Level 5 is available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/>

- 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.

Children may 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.

12. How will vulnerable children be supported to access to services

For families who are entitled to NCS support (either through sponsorship arrangements, means-tested subsidies or universal subsidies) or support of the legacy funding schemes, this support will be provided on the basis of non-term-time hours between 11 and 31 January. New applications for NCS continue to be accepted during this time. Arrangements are being made to enable children identified as in need of service provision 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](#).

Accessing services

13. What do I do if I feel I am entitled to access a services (due to being an essential worker or having a vulnerable child) and my provider says that they are closed or cannot take me?

In these circumstances, parents are advised to contact their local City or County Childcare Committee. Contact details of CCCs are available [here](#).

Parental Fees

14. I am not an essential worker, and therefore cannot send my children to childcare. Do I still need to pay fees?

Early learning and childcare providers have been requested by the Minister for Children to pause payment of fees, return fees paid in advance for the period of service that they have not been able to access, or arrange a credit for another time. The Government has confirmed that the Employee Wage Subsidy Scheme, which was made available to all childcare services to avail of,

will continue at the revised increased rates to ensure the sustainability of the sector where income was adversely affected due to closures or reductions in fee income.

15. I am an essential worker, but have chosen not to send my children to early learning and childcare. Do I still need to pay fees?

If there is no restriction in your access to a service which you have an agreed contract for, the expectation is that fees would still be required.

If you wish to change your childcare arrangements, your contract with your provider will indicate what notice period or other conditions will apply.

16. If my child is in full time childcare but also has benefit of ECCE hours, will the ECCE hours still be funded? Can my child still avail of full time hours? Will I have to pay extra fees?

Children who attend for ECCE hours and additional hours can continue to do so and the ECCE funding should continue to be deducted from their fee.

Vaccinations for Childcare Professionals

17. When will childcare professionals be vaccinated?

Currently early learning and childcare practitioners are Priority 11 for vaccination, ahead of people aged 55-64 and workers in other occupations important to the functioning of society. The timing of vaccination will depend on approval of additional vaccinations and supply coming on stream.

Childminding and 'childminding bubbles'

18. Can childminders still operate?

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

19. 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.