

Parent FAQ with regard to Early Learning and Care and School Aged Childcare applicable from 1 February to 5 March 2020

Safety for children, childcare professionals and parents

- 1. Why are Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (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 Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (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 and 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 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 reopening of the ECCE programme has been postponed until 5 March, and ELC/SAC services will only be open to children of essential workers and vulnerable children only.

- 2. Will staff in my service be wearing face coverings?**

The Department 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 settings i.e. face coverings should be worn by staff when not caring directly for children. The public health guidance can be found [here](#).

At times of high levels of infection in the community in particular, staff members may choose to wear a face covering at all times. 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 service providers support them in their choice.

- 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. We have recently returned from travel overseas. Can my child still attend the service?**

Detailed advice from the Government regarding travel can be found at gov.ie, including specific guidance on travel from Britain. (<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b4020-travelling-to-ireland-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>).

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 or the ECCE programme plus an additional 30 minutes only 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 is works in an essential service¹and
- 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 until March?

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. 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](#). 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.

The levels of uptake of services will be closely monitored by the Department on an ongoing basis and the conditions on children’s eligibility to access services during this period will be subject to ongoing review.

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 this period to 5 March. These categories are:

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

- 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.

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 continue to be provided on the basis of non-term-time hours from 1 February to 5 March. 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. Am I required to pay fees if I am not currently using my service?

The Department is aware that many providers have already chosen to refund, waive or credit fees for families not currently using an early learning and childcare service and the Minister for Children has welcomed this. To further encourage and support providers (some of whom may have a higher reliance on fees), the Department has brought forward additional enhanced funding for those services and applied certain conditions for services who opt to avail of this enhanced funding.

Where a provider has opted to avail of this enhanced funding, they are required to waive fees for children not attending. This applies to both open and closed services.

Your provider will be able to confirm if they are receiving enhanced funding, and consequently, their fee arrangements. They will also be able to clarify refund or credit arrangements for any pre-paid fees. These arrangements will apply from 1 February to 5 March.

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?

This will depend on your provider's fees policy and on whether the provider is availing of enhanced funding. Where a provider has opted to avail of this enhanced funding, they are required to waive fees for children not attending. See question 15 above.

16. If my child is in full time early learning and childcare but also benefits from ECCE programme hours, will the ECCE programme hours still be funded?

Yes.

17. Can my child still avail of full time hours?

Yes.

18. Will the ECCE programme funding continue to be deducted from my fees?

Yes.

Vaccinations for Childcare Professionals

19. When will childcare professionals be vaccinated?

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 (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020. 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 evidence for the prioritisation will be kept under review and the allocation groups may be updated, where necessary, in light of new evidence. The Department of Children, Equality,

Disability, Integration and Youth continues to engage with the Department of Health and the HSE on the position of early learning and childcare practitioners on the vaccination list.

Childminding and ‘childminding bubbles’

20. 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.

21. 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.