

Advisory Group

Planning for the Phased Reopening of Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare

Terms of Reference

Background

Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC) services were closed by Government on 12 March due to COVID-19. This affected over 200,000 children, their parents, 4,500 service providers and 31,000 staff. To support the sector during the initial closure period, DCYA continued to fund ELC and SAC providers under the existing subsidy schemes, including ECCE (free pre-school) and the National Childcare Scheme on an ex-gratia basis. The DCYA later introduced a Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS), which repurposes DCYA funding to support the ELC and SAC sector during this time of crisis.

DCYA is now making preparations for the gradual reopening of Early Learning and Child and School-Age Childcare services in line with Phases 3 and 4 of the Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business:

Phase 3 (29 June): Opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of essential workers in a phased manner with social distancing and other requirements applying.

Phase 4 (20 July): Opening of crèches, childminders and preschools for children of all other workers on a gradually increasing phased basis and slowly increasing thereafter.

There are a number of issues arising in respect of this work, including:

- Minimising the public health risk, especially given the difficulty of maintaining social distancing among young children and those caring for them.
- Ensuring the need for any restrictions to be consistent with young children's well-being and development needs and for early learning and care and school-age childcare provision at each phase to be child-centred.
- Providing early education for all pre-school children, meeting parental demand for early learning and care and school-age childcare as the economy reopens, and meeting the commitment to retain places for families who paid for early learning and care and school-age childcare before Covid-19, all while restricting capacity and thereby reducing adult-child ratios.
- Ensuring financial sustainability of the sector when capacity restrictions limit income and parents cannot afford to cover any higher costs with higher fees.
- Ensuring a sufficient number of qualified early learning and care and school-age childcare practitioners, given ongoing likelihood of sickness and self-isolation, reduced adult-child ratios, low wages and poor working conditions.

To inform the work, DCYA has established an Advisory Group.

Terms of Reference

The Terms of Reference for the Advisory Group are as follows:

- To identify key issues to be considered by DCYA in developing the Plan for Phased Reopening of ELC/SAC services
- To support DCYA with the identification of existing evidence and/or the generation of new evidence to inform the work
- To propose options and/or provide feedback on options under consideration by the DCYA
- To contribute to the development of resources for parents, providers and practitioners
- To formally engage and consult with others stakeholders, including wider members of the Early Years Forum on elements of the Plan at the direction of the DCYA and provide feedback.
- To support the DCYA with dissemination of the final Plan.

Membership

The Advisory Group will be chaired by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and includes the following members:

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Minister Katherine Zappone (Chair)

Bernie McNally

Anne-Marie Brooks

Mark Considine

Toby Wolfe

Sectoral representatives

Marian Quinn, Association of Childhood Professionals Ireland

Marie Daly, Community Forum

Teresa Heeney, Early Childhood Ireland

Denise McCormilla, National Childhood Network

Mary Moloney, PLÉ

Regina Bushell, Seas Suas

Childminding representative

Bernadette Burke, Childminding Ireland

Union representative

Diane Jackson, SIPTU

Tusla

Fiona McDonnell

Pobal

David Burke

Margaret Rogers

Secretariat

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs will provide secretariat support to the Advisory Group. The secretariat will include:

Eimear Carron
Nuala Connolly
Oonagh Fleming
Gillian Martin
James Scully

Schedule of Meetings

The Advisory Group will meet via Skype on the following dates.

13 May 2020
15 May 2020
19 May 2020
26 May 2020
2 June 2020
9 June 2020

Additional meetings may be tabled by the Chairperson as and when the need arises.

Attendance

Only appointed members of the Group may attend meetings; substitutes/alternates may not attend in their place.

Documentation

Agenda and any papers required for a meeting will be circulated to the Advisory Group by email at least 2 days in advance of a meeting to allow time for consideration. Members will be expected to have read these papers in advance of the meeting.

Minutes to record decisions taken and actions agreed will issue from the Secretariat within 2 days of each meeting.

Confidentiality and public commentary

Members are asked to treat Advisory Group discussions, information and documentation as confidential unless otherwise directed by the Chair. This will enable all members to speak freely and to enable healthy, open and innovative discussion.

In particular, individual members should not engage in any media, political or public discourse about the specific work of the Advisory Group unless otherwise agreed by the Group itself for a particular purpose. General commentary re the purpose of the group is permitted. Any queries from the media concerning the Advisory Group should be directed to the Secretariat.