

PRESS RELEASE



**An Roinn Leanaí
agus Gnóthaí Óige**
Department of Children
and Youth Affairs

Minister Zappone announces decisions and guidance to support the reopening of childcare services

Friday 29th May 2020

Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Dr Katherine Zappone, today announced a number of developments to assist childcare providers and parents plan for the reopening of services on June 29.

Minister Zappone welcomed expert guidance provided by the HSE Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) written specifically for the childcare sector.

The guidance, developed in consultation with her Department, focuses on a “play pod” model. The “play pod” model restricts interactions between closed groups of children and adults as an alternative to social distancing, which is not possible with young children. The purpose of ‘play-pods’ is to limit the number of people a child has contact with, to facilitate tracing, and to support close, positive interactions between children and their adult caregivers, like in a key-worker system. This system will also reduce the amount of contact adults have with each other. Where possible, there should be two adults in a ‘play-pod’, to allow breaks without need for floating staff. The maximum size of a ‘play-pod’ will be confirmed in the coming days.

Services will now be asked to apply the guidance to their setting and determine what capacity they may offer. It is expected that a significant amount of capacity will be available in individual services that reopen in the summer, subject to, for example, their space, room layout and staffing availability. Whilst there are 4,500 Early Learning and Care and School-Age Childcare services in the country, fewer than 2,000 of these normally remain open in July and August.

The HPSC guidance developed by their Antimicrobial Resistance and Infection Control Division (AMRIC) on 'Infection Prevention and Control guidance for settings providing childcare during the COVID-19 Pandemic' was agreed by NPHE's Expert Advisory Group this

week and will be published on the HPSC website today. As services reopen, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs will keep the operation of the guidance under close review and take appropriate updated action as required.

The Minister also announced which children would be eligible to resume full or part-time childcare services from 29 June. Whilst initially the Government Roadmap had indicated that services would resume only for the children of essential workers, this has now been widened. Subject to local capacity, services are encouraged to support:

- Children of health and social care workers, other frontline workers, childcare practitioners and parents who need access to childcare in order to return to work.
- Vulnerable children sponsored under the National Childcare Scheme(NCS) (for example, children who are homeless and Tusla referrals) and children funded through legacy childcare schemes who are experiencing poverty, disadvantage or child welfare issues.
- Children with disabilities who previously attended part or full-time early learning and care, including those preparing to start school in September.
- Children previously registered in childcare services on March 12, whose parents continue to need childcare for employment or training purposes and who were assured that they would retain their place through conditions attached to the Department's Temporary Wage Subsidy Childcare Scheme (TWSCS). If capacity issues emerge, priority should be given to the children of essential or frontline workers.

Childminders will also be able to resume looking after children in the childminder's home from June 29, while complying with HPSC advice.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs has been engaging intensively with a number of organisations representing the childcare sector, through an Advisory Group. It is preparing a range of additional guidance and resources to assist the sector to prepare for reopening. These will start to issue in the coming days and continue over the 4 remaining weeks before opening.

Speaking after today's Government meeting, Minister Zappone said:

"My Department is delighted to have this detailed health guidance from the HPSC to help services plan for reopening. I am also very appreciative to the many representatives of the sector on the Advisory Group who have assisted with the planning to date and who will continue to assist with further resources over the coming 4 weeks."

The Department has conducted research to ascertain the level of demand among parents to assess the level of demand from parents for childcare services. IPSOS MRBI carried out a survey of 563 households with children under the age of 15 years. This was conducted from 22 – 24th May 2020.

Preliminary data has revealed a number of important findings in relation to parents' childcare arrangements during the COVID-19 restrictions, and their plans once restrictions are eased in line with the Government's Roadmap. Key findings include that:

- Prior to restrictions, over half of respondents (56%) cared for their children in their home, with 27% availing of centre-based Early Learning and Care or School-Aged Childcare. A further 18% had the support of grandparents, while 15% used childminders for their childcare needs.
- Unsurprisingly, since restrictions have been in place, the majority of parents (97%) have reported caring for their children at home.
- While 27% of parents were availing of centre-based care prior to restrictions, looking ahead to when restrictions are initially lifted, 13% of parents intend to return their children to centre-based care.

Acknowledging the findings, Minister Zappone noted:

“The voice of parents is key to how we move towards the phased re-opening of childcare services. They will make choices in the best interests of their children and their families. Understanding their intentions and concerns will allow my Department to plan with greater precision, addressing concerns parents may have.”

With the support of Pobal and Better Start, the Department is also currently conducting research among Childcare Providers across the country.

Whilst demand for services may be lower than it was in March, some working parents who were using childcare services before the closures on March 12 will be reassured to know that they may now have the option to return to the service.

The Minister is strongly encouraging service providers and parents to make contact with each other so that the level of demand and supply for places from June 29th onwards can be known.

Minister Zappone said: “For the sake of children, families and our economy, I hope that those childcare services that normally operate over the summer will be able to resume their service on June 29th. This is essential so that parents can get back to work. This is a national effort. The Trojan efforts of our frontline workers have assisted us this far. I know that all of those who can play a part in getting our economy on a recovery path will do so. It is also very important that vulnerable children will be able to access early learning and care services, as soon as they are permitted to reopen. Children and families are at the heart of our plan. Re-opening childcare will be as child centred as possible and as much risk as possible will be mitigated. The safety and wellbeing of children and enabling them resume social interaction and play with their friends is what we are focused on.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is prioritising the actions necessary for reopening full and part-time childcare services on 29 June. Once these are advanced, priority will move to planning for the resumption of ECCE (free pre-school programme) at the end of August.

Consultation

The Department is undertaking extensive consultation and research in developing the plan for phased reopening of childcare services. This includes the establishment of an expert Advisory Group to review and develop proposals. The Group includes representatives chosen by the childcare sector, specifically the Association of Childhood Professionals, Early Childhood Ireland, the National Childhood Network, the National Community Forum, PLÉ and Seas Suas. The group also includes Tusla, Pobal, SIPTU and Childminding Ireland. Collectively members represent tens of thousands of providers and staff.

The Minister has also established a Reference Group, to supplement the work of the Advisory Group on phased service reopening, and to give an opportunity for input to provider representatives who are not on the Advisory Group. The Reference Group had its first meeting yesterday, May 28, and the Advisory Group will meet again next week.