

FAQ

Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) services over 1 February – 5 March 2021

Introduction

On Tuesday 26 January, Government made the decision to extend the suspension of the ECCE programme and to continue to restrict access to other Early Learning and Childcare services to the children of essential workers and to vulnerable children. It is currently planned for these arrangements to be in place until 5 March, with the timeframe remaining subject to review in the context of the evolving public health circumstances.

The present situation is undoubtedly challenging for everyone involved in Early Learning and Childcare including providers, staff, parents and children. In this context, my Department is endeavouring to balance a number of objectives:

- Supporting the overarching public health messages
- Ensuring that ELC remains open, even at very low levels of occupancy, and available for children and families who need it at this time, either to enable parents to work in an essential service or because of children's vulnerability
- Enabling providers to reimburse parents if they do not take up service
- Supporting providers to retain their staff
- Supporting providers' sustainability to enable services can return to normal once restrictions are lifted
- Achieving administrative efficiency through the continued use of existing funding schemes and other whole of economy supports (EWSS)
- Protecting exchequer investment

The package of measures described in this document is designed to ensure that the significant public money which is being invested in services at this time is structured in a fair and balanced way to help achieve these objectives.

Central to this package is the enhanced Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, which Early Learning and Childcare providers continue to be eligible to access, without having to demonstrate reduction in turnover as other employers do. All providers are encouraged to avail of this scheme which significantly contributes to payroll costs, covering at least 80% of average wage costs in most instances.

On top of this, although the ECCE programme has been suspended, at least 70% of ECCE funding can continue to be claimed by all services, whether open or closed and NCS, CCSP, TEC and AIM Level 7 funding schemes continue to be payable full rates.

In closed services, in return for this funding, they will be asked to commit to waiving parental fees, retaining staff where possible, keeping places for children and undertaking remote engagement with children. In open services, the remaining 30% of the value of the ECCE funding will also be made up,

subject to services providing the same assurances to the Department. Most services are doing this already, and I warmly welcome this.

We recognise that for some providers who are particularly reliant on parental fee income, the requirement to waive fees for families not using their service at this time presents difficulties. In these circumstances, a newly designed Covid-19 Support Payment (CSP) is being put in place that will support these providers to parental waive fees during this period while remaining sustainable.

Our estimates indicate that the overwhelming majority of providers will be sustainable with these measures. For the small numbers where there are particular challenges, the Sustainability Fund will open a new strand of funding tailored to the present arrangements.

Contributions from all parts of the sector have fed into to developing this package, including extensive consultations with sector representative organisations. I would like to thank everyone who has taken the time to share their perspectives to help to inform this work.

In particular though I would like again to express my gratitude of those who work in the sector, in operating and delivering services to children and families during this time. Your contribution to the country during this period of restrictions is vital. Without you, many other services and sectors of society would find it very difficult to function. Without you, many vulnerable children many not find the care and support that they need. You are providing an essential service and your contribution is very much appreciated.

Thank you,

Roderic O’Gorman TD
Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth

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Overview

The overall funding approach outlined in this document will cover the period of 1 February to 5 March subject to decisions by Government. Commitments to funding in any given cycle relate only to that cycle and do not give rise to ongoing commitments.

This FAQ document replaces previous versions relating to the January 2021 arrangements. The provisions within the January FAQ document expire on 31 January and are replaced by the provisions of this document.

Specific updates and revisions to this FAQ document may be made to provide additional detail as necessary and if further information becomes available.

As the decisions of Government change and evolve based on health advice and associated conditions impacting business and services across the State, DCEDIY will continue to direct and advise within the context of those decisions.

These FAQs may also be subject to further change within the parameters of Government should a health or fiscal policy need arise.

1. What ELC/SAC services can operate from 1 February?

The resumption of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme has been postponed until 5 March 2021. Services that provide the ECCE Programme only or the ECCE Programme with an additional 30 minutes of childcare paid for by parents (hereafter referred to ECCE only services) will remain closed during this period. Funding arrangements will change as described in the funding section of these FAQs.

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

- children who have a parent who works in an essential service; and/or
- vulnerable children.

2. What happens after this phase?

Given the uncertainty around the overall movement through Covid-19 related restrictions and the changing patterns of ELC and SAC usage, commitments to funding in any given cycle relate only to that cycle and do not give rise to ongoing commitments.

DCEDIY is committed to ensuring that overall investment in the sector is maintained and that services are sustained through this crisis. This may entail further adjustments on commencement of any changes to Covid-19 related restrictions or where it is necessary to better support ELC/SAC providers generally.

Conditions with regard to provision of funding for the period

3. What are the funding arrangement for this phase?

During this phase there will be different approaches to funding services depending on whether they are open or closed. Given the continued suspension of the ECCE Programme, the funding for this programme will be restructured to support the Department’s objectives as outlined above with specific conditions in place to support part or all of the ECCE funding. Other Department funding schemes will be paid at full rates and on the same basis as previously. ELC/SAC services continue to be entitled to access the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and all are encouraged to do so.

There will also be two streams of funding available: standard and enhanced payments. These are further defined below. The standard and enhanced payments reflect the need for DCEDIY to make certain adjustments to ensure the equitable distribution of funding to best support the sector. Such decisions are made with consideration to the totality of funding made available to the sector by the State.

The following funding will be available from DCEDIY:

All Open Services:

Standard Payments:	Enhanced Payments:	Conditions for enhanced payments (see FAQ below for further detail)
EWSS	Covid-19 Support Payment (CSP) for services that may have a high degree of reliance on parental fees	Waive fees for non-participating children; hold children’s places; seek to retain staff; engage with ECCE children not attending the service
100% of NCS, CCSP, TEC and AIM Level 7 funding	Additional ECCE compensatory provision which will equate to 30% of current ECCE funding.	
70% of ECCE Funding	Access to sustainability funding where required	

Closed services with closure approved by DCEDIY:

Standard Payments:	Enhanced Payments:	Conditions for both enhanced and standard payments
EWSS	Covid-19 Support Payment for services that may have a high degree of reliance on parental fees	Waive fees for all children; hold children’s places; seek to retain staff; engage with ECCE children not attending the service
	100% of NCS, CCSP, TEC and AIM Level 7 funding	
	ECCE compensatory provision which will be equal to 70% of current ECCE funding	

Services Closed under instruction from Public Health:

Standard Payments:	Enhanced Payments:	Conditions for both enhanced and standard payments
EWSS	Covid-19 Support Payment for services that may have a high degree of reliance on parental fees	Waive fees for all children; hold children's places; seek to retain staff; engage with ECCE children not attending the service
100% of NCS, CCSP, TEC and AIM Level 7 funding		
ECCE compensatory provision which will be equal to 70% of current ECCE funding	Additional ECCE compensatory provision which will equate to 30% of current ECCE funding.	

4. What is the Covid-19 Support Payment (CSP)?

The Covid-19 Support Payment (CSP) is for services that meet certain criteria and have a high degree of reliance on parental fees.

The CSP is intended to support services that are very reliant on parental fees to remain sustainable during this period, while meeting the condition of not charging fees for families whose children are not attending the service.

The CSP is a payment made directly to your service, if your service is eligible.

The payment seeks to enable services support parents by not charging fees for children who are not attending, regardless of whether non-attendance is because their parents are not essential workers or because their parents have chosen not to use ELC and SAC services at this time.

Eligibility for the CSP and the level of payment will depend on:

- The total value of DCEDIY funding (ECCE, AIM, NCS, legacy schemes) allocated to the service in a typical week.
- The capacity of the service, as specified in the Tusla register, to reflect the degree to which the service may be reliant on parental fees.
- Only services that are either full-time or provide school-age childcare (either on a standalone basis or in addition to the provision of ELC, e.g. as a sessional or part-time ELC provider) will be eligible, in order to target the funding on those services most reliant on parental fees.
- CSP will only be available to Tusla-registered services that have at least one child registered on a DCEDIY funding scheme.

The CSP will cover the period from 1 February to 5 March.

The CSP will only operate during the current period when occupancy levels across the sector are low and while services are being asked not to charge fees to non-attending families.

The CSP will be reviewed every few weeks, and may be adjusted depending on changing levels of occupancy and sustainability requirements across the sector.

Services that are eligible for the funding will in the coming days receive notification of their eligibility and the amount they will receive if they agree to the specified conditions, which include not charging fees to non-attending parents.

Further details on the CSP will be provided in the coming days.

5. I am due payment in the week ending 29 January, will I receive this funding?

All services (open and closed with permissions) will receive 100% payments for schemes other than ECCE and 70% of ECCE funding. The remaining payments will be subject to the conditions and process described in this document for accessing enhanced funding arrangements or for accessing funding on foot of force majeure permissions.

Closed services should note that if they do not wish to sign up to the conditions for funding as noted below that this payment will be recouped.

6. What conditions are attached to the funding during this period?

For all Open Services, the following conditions will attach to enhanced funding for the period 1 February – 5 March:

- Your service must be eligible to open and operate.
- You are only permitted to charge fees to parents who will avail of your service.
- You must maintain places for all children in your service, including those who are unable to attend during this period.
- You must make all reasonable effort to retain all of your staff.
- You should engage with ECCE children not attending your service

For closed services with closure approved by DCEDIY or directed to close by public health, the following conditions will attach to all funding for the period 1 February – 5 March:

- You are not permitted to charge fees to parents.
- You must maintain places for all children in your service, including those who are unable to attend during this period.
- You must make all reasonable effort to retain all of your staff.
- You should engage with ECCE children not attending your service.

Closed services where closure is not approved by DCEDIY:

- Services that close without being directed by public health or having permission to close with force majeure will not be eligible to apply for continued funding from DCEDIY.

7. How do I apply for the CSP?

An application form is expected to be made available by 12 February which will enable open providers formally agree to the terms and conditions. Payment of an amount equivalent to 30% of ECCE and (where eligible) payment of the CSP will be made on foot of providers signing this agreement.

Instructions will issue directly to closed services granted force majeure on mechanisms to apply for this funding.

Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)

8. Will AIM funding be available to services during this period?

Yes. In line with current ECCE Programme provisions, those services continuing to receive ECCE Programme payments and that have approved AIM applications for Level 7 and Level 1 supports will continue to receive AIM payments for these Levels.

AIM Level 1 payments will be paid at 100% in February.

AIM Level 7 payments will be paid in full (100% of approved amount) to all eligible services. If Level 7 support funding was approved to buy in additional assistance but the staff member is no longer on the payroll e.g. on temporary layoff, etc. a Notification of Change must be completed and submitted to aimteam@pobal.ie

9. Will AIM payments change because of the decision to delay the resumption of the ECCE programme?

AIM Level 7 weekly payment rates have increased from €195 to €210 per week from the beginning of January. In order to bring AIM payments in line with ECCE Programme payments during this period, AIM pre-payments made on 8 January will cover the period up to the end of January. The following payment due at the end of January will cover the period up to 5 March in line with ECCE payments. Providers may note that due to AIM level 1's integration with ECCE, this will be paid in two tranches (70% with the 30% following very soon afterwards).

Operation of ELC/SAC Services

10. What are the requirements for a service where a substantial majority of children are ECCE Programme only?

Where an ELC/SAC service is provided to one or more children funded through means other than through the ECCE Programme then that service may continue to operate.

Where a service provides a preschool service for more than 3.5 hours per day then that service may continue to operate.

Where a service provides a school-age childcare service (of any duration), then it may continue to operate.

11. Am I required to open if I provide a Junior/Senior Infants “link” service?

A link service is a service providing a short period school aged childcare to junior/senior infant children finishing an hour before the end of the school day.

Where a service provides a school-age childcare service where the total time spent by every child does not exceed 1.5 hours per day then that service may close. Continued provision of subsidy will be conditional on agreement to the conditions associated with force majeure (see section on funding for closed services above).

12. I have more than one ELC/SAC facility and wish to close one facility whilst accommodating eligible children from the closed facility in another facility. Is this permissible?

In the first instance, you must seek the permission and agreement of the parents to move their children to another ELC/SAC location; it must not inconvenience them or cause unnecessary anxiety for the child or the family affected. In addition you must make a force majeure application and be approved to close the facility (see FAQs on Force Majeure).

Should the parents agree and force majeure be granted, further information on the management of calendars, attendance and registrations within the affected service is available from the scheme administrator.

13. How will families of essential workers and/or vulnerable children be supported to access ELC/SAC services?

For families who are entitled to funding under the National Childcare Scheme or support of CCSP/TEC, this support will continue to be provided on the basis of non-term-time hours from 1 February to 5 March.

Children who are considered vulnerable within the meaning provided in the section below on vulnerable children and children of essential workers will continue to receive funding which would include:

- NCS income-assessed subsidies
- NCS Universal subsidies
- CCSP and TEC legacy scheme subsidies

New applications for NCS continue to be accepted during this time. Arrangements are being made to enable children identified as in need of ELC/SAC 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](#).

14. Are School-Age Childcare (SAC) services catering for SAC children during current restrictions required to support remote school-work?

During current restrictions, the primary consideration should be children's well-being and ensuring that their care needs are met. It has been agreed between DCEDIY and the Department of Education that there is no requirement that School-Age Childcare services will support school-work. If the service provides support with school-work, this should be in agreement with children and their parents/guardians.

Essential workers

15. 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](#). For the purposes of accessing ELC/SAC, an essential worker may be working from home.

The levels of uptake of services among essential workers will continue to be monitored by the DCEDIY during this period and the conditions on children's eligibility to access services during this period will be subject to ongoing review.

16. Do both parents need to be essential workers?

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

17. Is an ELC/SAC provider/staff an essential worker?

Yes, ELC/SAC is included in the list of essential services.

18. What should an ELC/SAC provider do if they have concerns that a parent is not an essential worker?

If an ELC/SAC provider has any concerns, they may, at their discretion, ask for a proof of employment, for example a letter from the parent's employer.

19. If an ELC/SAC service is required to prioritise amongst essential workers, who are the priority workers?

ELC/SAC providers are asked to ensure that a place is available for all children of essential workers within their service. As noted above the levels of uptake of services among essential workers will be closely monitored by the DCEDIY on an ongoing basis and the conditions of children's eligibility to access services during this period will be subject to ongoing review.

20. Am I expected to take in additional children of healthcare or other essential workers or children who are vulnerable?

It remains at the discretion of the provider whether they choose to take in new children. The ability to take in new children – whether short-term or long-term – is allowed by public health advice, and there is an FAQ below on how to include new children into the play pod structure.

The Department is aware of the needs of vulnerable children and the benefits of participating in ELC/SAC services at this time. The Department is also conscious that during this challenging period healthcare and other essential workers may have additional, unanticipated childcare needs, particularly as a result of the temporary school closures.

Information has been shared through the Department of Health and the Department of Education with healthcare workers and school staff about the existing options of contacting their local CCC for assistance in finding local childcare, and of getting subsidies through the National Childcare Scheme.

Vulnerable children

21. Who is a vulnerable child?

Any child who is subject to a sponsor arrangements under the National Childcare Scheme or under the CCSP legacy scheme are all defined as vulnerable children.

A provider may assume a child to 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.

22. What is a Sponsor arrangement?

Children who are currently engaged in National Childcare Scheme (NCS) sponsorship arrangements are all defined as vulnerable for the purposes of determining eligibility to services during the period 1 February – 5 March. 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
- 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.

Public Health

23. Why are ELC/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 ELC/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/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 has 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 resumption of the ECCE programme has been postponed, and ELC/SAC services will only be open to children of essential workers and vulnerable children only.

24. 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.

25. Are there new symptoms that ELC/SAC providers, staff and parents need to look out for? Has the advice on runny noses changed?

There are no new symptoms which ELC/SAC providers, staff or parents needs to look out for; however, you 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.

26. Should ELC/SAC staff wear face coverings now?

The DCEDIY 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 services.

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

27. What about staff who are in a high-risk category or whose family members are high risk?
How can we protect them?

The [guidance](#) from the HSPC should be followed in relation to vulnerable people or those living with vulnerable people. If an at-risk or vulnerable worker cannot work from home and must be in the workplace, employers will make sure that they are preferentially supported to maintain a physical distance of 2 metres. It is recognised by the DCEDIY that, by its very nature, setting based ELC/SAC does not lend itself to remote working arrangements; however, employers should enable vulnerable workers to work from home where possible (e.g. administrative or support work). Where remote working cannot be facilitated then this should be discussed fully with staff members prior to them returning and any concerns considered and addressed by way of adjustments to their work where possible and if required.

It is important to remind all staff that the risk of infection can be reduced significantly by following up to date guidance on infection control, respiratory hygiene, hand hygiene and cleaning control protocols. Staff should also read in detail the Covid-19 Infection Prevention and Control [guidance](#) for services providing ELC/SAC during the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Return To Work Safely Protocol Covid-19 Setting Preparation Plan [Template](#).

28. Will close contacts in ELC/SAC services still be referred for testing?

The Public Health Pathway for ELC/SAC services and schools remains unchanged at present. Where a confirmed case has been in a service during the infectious period, public health will continue to work with the service to identify close contacts and advise on appropriate action to be taken. This will include testing of close contacts as required.

29. Should staff and children attending services undergo routine testing?

Public health advice is that neither staff nor children need to be tested for Covid-19 unless they are displaying symptoms or have been identified as a close contact and have been referred for testing. Staff and parents should be advised to take a very precautionary approach where they or someone in their household or family unit is displaying any symptoms of Covid-19. They should not attend the service if they or their children are displaying symptoms. They should stay home and contact their GP.

30. Can the DCEDIY consider moving ELC/SAC staff further up the priority list for vaccinations?

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for the Department of Health. The rollout of the Covid-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

Currently ELC/SAC staff are Priority 11 for vaccination, ahead of people aged 55-64 and workers in other occupations important to the functioning of society.

The aim of the Covid-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the immunisation programme is rolled out nationally.

The evidence will be kept under review and the allocation groups may be updated, where necessary, in light of new evidence. The DCEDIY continues to engage with the Department of Health and the HSE on the position of early learning and childcare practitioners on the vaccination list.

31. Are additional protective measures now required in ELC/SAC services?

The HSE has confirmed that there is no change to the public health advice for ELC/SAC services, which services have been following effectively since reopening in June to allow for their safe operation. In following the guidance at this time, the HSE strongly recommends that services, staff and families pay particular attention to two core areas:

- (i) **Exposures and symptoms (as explained in HPSC guidance) within the family unit of each staff member and child over the past week / 10 days.** It is crucial that if anyone within the family unit has any symptoms that could be consistent with Covid-19 that they self-isolate and contact their GP for testing. Anyone within that close exposure network should restrict their movements until the result is known. Young children should not under these circumstances be attending any ELC/SAC service. Further, if a young child has any symptoms that are evolving or uncertain, **there should now be a clear precautionary approach** and they should not attend an ELC/SAC service.

The HPSC guidance for symptoms and isolation requirements are available [here](#) and we would ask that all families and staff members attend to these and apply them **in a precautionary manner**. We ask that all ELC/SAC services themselves are clear on symptoms of concern for their staff or children and that all are clear on the isolation requirements in place, and that families are aware of the precautionary approach and low threshold being applied to ensure the safe continued opening of all facilities.

- (ii) **Re-focusing of all staff within services once the HPSC guidelines are being applied and implemented by staff and within the service.** HPSC guidance on safe opening are available [here](#) and we ask that all services go through the guidance carefully and with renewed focus

to ensure that the recommendations can be applied in an appropriate rigorous manner. There will have been learning within each service over the past months on which aspects of the guidance have been more difficult to implement, and the renewed focus should be on these areas to ensure best solutions and protections are in place.

Particular focus should apply to **break times, staff rooms etc.** and ensuring strict social distancing is in place, with face-coverings worn by staff at these times and a focus on hand and respiratory hygiene. We ask that all staff and families pay very careful attention to national public health advice and recommendations, for the safety and wellbeing of all.

32. Is the public health guidance for SAC different from the guidance for ELC?

The same public health guidance applies to all ELC/SAC services.

33. What happens if there are suspected or confirmed cases of Covid-19 among staff or children in my service?

As you will be aware, the HSE has put in place specific arrangements for Covid-19 testing in schools and ELC/SAC services. The HSE reports that this Public Health Pathway has proved effective since its introduction in August. HSE Public Health teams for schools and ELC/SAC services remain in place and will clearly be focussed on responding to ELC and SAC services.

Weekly reports on mass testing in schools and ELC/SAC services can be found [here](#).

Some information to parents for situations where their child has been designated a close contact are available [here](#).

It is important to note that:

- Not all confirmed cases will require Public Health engagement with the service – for example if a case was not determined to be in the service during the infectious period, there may be no actions required.
- Departments of Public Health will contact services where a confirmed case is notified to them that may have implications for the service (e.g. the case was in the service during the infectious period and there is a risk of spread in the service). This will usually be the same day Departments are notified, but may occasionally be the next day.

34. Do I need to shut my service if a staff member or child is suspected to have Covid-19?

If a child or staff member in your service is displaying symptoms of Covid-19 they should leave or be collected from the service immediately. They or their parents/guardians should be advised to contact their doctor. Their doctor will arrange testing for them if they need it.

If they test positive for Covid-19, the ELC/SAC service will be contacted by local public health staff to discuss the case, identify people who have been in contact with them and advise on any actions or precautions that should be taken.

It is not necessary to take any action in relation to closing your service, partially or in full, until you have been contacted by and discussed the case with local public health staff.

You should follow the advice set out in the HPSC's "Infection Prevention and Control guidance for services providing ELC/SAC during the Covid-19 Pandemic" in relation to cleaning rooms/services where there was a suspected or confirmed case of Covid-19. If a room is closed temporarily for cleaning and no other room is available, the staff/children using that room may have to leave the service until the room is available again.

35. What restrictions apply if someone returns from travel overseas?

Detailed advice from the Government regarding travel can be found at [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie), including specific guidance on travel from Britain.

(<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b4020-travelling-to-ireland-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>).

36. In relation to the direction that services are safe to operate, are geographical factors being taken into account?

The advice from the national public health experts that services are safe to operate applies to all regions.

37. I have new children attending my service, can I assign them to existing play pods or do I need to create new play pods?

If there is room to add new children to existing play pods while ensuring compliance with regulatory adult : child ratios, services may do so. However, in some cases new play pods may need to be formed. In either case, once a child is assigned to a play pod they should, where possible, be consistently cared for in that play pod while attending the service under the current restrictions.

38. I have fewer children in my service at present, can I merge some of my play pods?

The public health advice remains that play-pods should be kept as small as can be reasonably practical in the specific childcare context. There is no requirement for services to restructure play pods in situations where demand is lower than before.

However, it is a matter for the service provider to decide how best to structure play pods in the context of their own setting and taking account of the public health guidance and the regulatory adult : child ratios.

If it is not practical for a service to maintain existing play pods (e.g. due to staffing pressures or if numbers in play pods are extremely low), services may consider merging some play-pods. Prior careful consideration of when and how to merge play pods should occur, to ensure children's movements and mixing beyond their play pods are minimised.

Any restructuring of play pods must fully comply with regulatory adult : child ratios. Children assigned to the new/newly formed play pods should, where possible, be consistently cared for in those play pods while attending the service under the current restrictions.

39. Can I merge play pods from different settings?

There is no requirement for providers to restructure play pods or services where demand is low. However, it is acknowledged that it may not be practical to maintain existing play pod structures with lower demand. Providers who are considering merging play pods from different settings should note Q.38 above.

From a public health perspective, providers who decide to merge play pods from different settings should ensure that they are operating within the public health guidance and regulatory ratios. Prior careful consideration of when and how to merge play pods should occur, to ensure children's movements and mixing beyond their play pods are minimised.

40. I have moved some of my staff to shorter hours due to lower demand. Can I rotate the staff in my play-pods?

Play pods are used as an alternative to social distancing in ELC/SAC settings and are designed to limit the number of people that children and adults have contact with in the service. Play pods are also used to support contact tracing.

In this context it is important that the structure of the play pod is maintained where possible. Rotation of staff should only occur where necessary and where it does not undermine the play pod system. Staff who are assigned to a play pod should work with that play pod consistently.

41. Some of my staff share accommodation and/or transport to work. Do they have to work in the same play pod?

Yes, the HSE has advised that where staff working in a service share accommodation or travel together to work they should be placed in the same play pod where possible. This will help to ensure that the play pod structure is effective and that there is no cross contamination of play pods due to interaction of staff from different play pods outside of the service.

Ongoing Engagement with ECCE Children

42. While the ECCE Programme is not operating, are there activities that staff should be carrying out?

During the period when the ECCE Programme is not operating, as a condition of ongoing funding service providers are required, insofar as possible, to

- Support and require, insofar as possible, participation in CPD activities for staff who are not currently delivering ELC/SAC services.
- Where possible, engage with children and families who normally take part in the ECCE Programme and other children who are not attending the service.
- Maintain a record of all efforts to support such participation in CPD and engagement with children and families.

(1) CPD

Until the ECCE Programme resumes, many practitioners will have an opportunity to undertake online training or development activities to help them meet the demands of their professional roles. Practitioners can choose any number of free online courses and resources that may suit their particular professional development needs. There is information on a number of courses on <https://first5.gov.ie/practitioners/continuing-professional-development>

Managers are asked to keep a record of their team's CPD activities using the form on the First 5 CPD page and to encourage their staff to keep records of their personal engagement with CPD.

Services can also use this time to review and revise their service policies and procedures. When reviewing policies, particular attention should be given to the Quality and Regulatory Framework eLearning programme linked on the First 5 page.

(2) Engaging with families

(1) Services are required insofar as possible to support engagement with ECCE and other children through their teams and to maintain records

.

A preschool hub with free online resources will be available for practitioners on the First 5 website in the coming days. Services are asked to engage with all children and their families using the

specialised knowledge of the children in your setting. This engagement might involve using the playing at home resources available on First 5 or for example through a daily zoom call.

Particular attention should be given to supporting children who avail of supports through the Access and Inclusion Model.

43. Should I also promote remote learning for non-ECCE children who are not currently attending my service?

ELC/SAC managers are asked to support remote learning for all non-attending children through their teams **where possible** and where it does not encroach on the care needs of children on-site.

A preschool hub with free online resources will be available for practitioners on the First 5 website in the coming days. Services are asked to engage with all children and their families to extend the playing at home resources available on First 5 using the specialised knowledge of the children in your setting. This engagement might be through for example a daily Zoom call.

44. Can I claim force majeure permission to close due to Covid-19 or for circumstances beyond my control e.g. access to school grounds where the service is normally provided?

Generally, force majeure applications are considered on a case by case basis, and are granted when a service closes due to circumstances outside of its control e.g. power blackout or local flooding, lack of access to premises or a regional or national severe weather warning under which people are asked not to travel. Force majeure applications on such grounds will continue to be considered on a case by case basis. The force majeure application may be made for closure across a whole week or part of a week.

The closure of ELC and SAC services due to COVID-19 can be considered a Force Majeure situation. The Department is not obliged to make payments for ELC and SAC programmes under Force Majeure. Funding for services granted force majeure will be dependent on agreement to the conditions as described in the funding section of these FAQs.

Public health advice of 6 January is that it is safe for ELC/SAC services to operate. Therefore, force majeure permission will not be given where a service decides to close due to Covid-19 concerns, whether by decision of a Board of Management or by decision by an owner/operator, and where there is no direction to close by public health. This is to ensure that the children of essential workers and vulnerable children continue to receive ELC/SAC during this period.

Force majeure permission to close will be considered where staff shortages are asserted by providers. A staff shortage will only be considered for force majeure purposes where those shortages arise from Covid-19 infections or where staff members have been designated as close contacts, and where the service subject to the force majeure claim is rendered nonviable by the shortages. Correspondence from a doctor/HSE with the individual's name removed must be held by the service for potential verification of these claims.

It should be noted that from 11 January, schools should facilitate the opening of ELC/SAC services on their premises. The Department of Education has written to school Principals informing them that school buildings should remain accessible for essential services, including ELC/SAC services for the children of essential workers and vulnerable children. If any ELC/SAC service located on school premises is experiencing difficulties in accessing their premises during the school closure period, they should contact SACquality@equality.gov.ie

N.B. Providers seeking force majeure for the period 1/1/21 to 31/1/21 should refer to the January FAQs for guidance.

45. What should I do if I have no eligible children in my ELC/SAC service?

The service must contact all parents to ask if they have eligible children. If a service has no eligible children registered, or has no demand from the parents of eligible children for its services, the service should contact their CCC to inform them. A parent may decide on whether they wish to use their child's place on a weekly basis.

The service can apply for force majeure permission, and must confirm to Pobal that they have no eligible children registered in their service whose parents require ELC/SAC. In such cases, providers must maintain evidence of this. The conditions of funding as described in preceding question apply

The evidence must include a copy of a letter sent to all registered parents informing them that ELC/SAC is available for the children of essential workers and vulnerable children, and should include responses from parents indicating that their children are not in the eligible categories or that they do not require childcare.

46. Will I lose NCS, CCSP or TEC funding for children who do not attend between 1 February and 5 March for whatever reason?

As long as your service is open and providing ELC/SAC for children of essential workers and vulnerable children, funding in respect of all other children under the NCS, CCSP and TEC schemes will be paid to services in accordance with the payment calendars and child registrations.

Registrations for children of essential workers and vulnerable children should be amended as they present in the service and if not already on non-terms hours then their registration should be amended to reflect current position. All other registrations should be left as they were in December and reported as such in the return to Pobal.

Services are reminded to submit their NCS attendance returns on the Hive following Pobal's instructions for this period, as that return is the trigger for their NCS payment. Providers will not be required to count the period 1 January to 5 March when assessing periods of non-attendance or under attendance. The period 1 January to 5 March will be treated as non-term; instructions on managing calendars and registrations for this period will be provided by Pobal, the scheme administrator.

47. I provide ECCE alongside other ELC/SAC services, am I required to confirm whether ECCE only families need a place?

Whilst it is open to you to allow families to avail of ELC/SAC services you are not required for the purposes of closing under force majeure to make such offer and/or retain evidence of the offer.

48. What if I have sustainability concerns as a result of current restrictions in place on my service?

DCEDIY has a sustainability fund in place to support services with sustainability issues. This is additional to the existing financial supports for services, including the EWSS and the CSP. Where a service has sustainability concerns as a result of the current restrictions, additional supports may be made available under this fund to ensure services can continue to operate. Further details on this fund will be issued shortly. In the first instance, services with concerns are encouraged to get in touch with their local CCC.

Childminding and 'childminding bubbles'

49. Can childminders still operate?

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

50. 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.

Parental Fees

51. Are parents required to pay fees during this period, if they cannot send their child in because they are not essential workers, or the child is not vulnerable?

It is the policy intention that parents who do not use a service during this time do not pay fees. In order to achieve this, a condition of waiving parental fees has been attached to a portion of the funding available to open services and all of the funding available to services that are closed with approval.

If providers access the conditional funding, parents are not required to pay fees.

However, if providers do not access the conditional funding, they may still request fees from parents. Contract terms between providers and parents may stipulate specific obligations of both parties. Providers are asked to bear in mind that parents who are essential workers or who have vulnerable children have a broad range of personal circumstances and to consider what arrangements (e.g. refunds or fee credits) can be made for eligible parents who do not wish not to take up an ELC/SAC place at this time.

The DCEDIY acknowledges that the relationship between a service and parent is a private one based on a contract between those two parties.

Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme

52. What is the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS)?

The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is an economy-wide enterprise support for eligible businesses in respect of eligible employees.

The scheme has two elements as follows:

- It provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers based on the numbers of paid and eligible employees on the employer's payroll; and
- It charges a reduced rate of employer PRSI of 0.5% on wages paid which are eligible for the subsidy payment.

Full details of the scheme are available on the Revenue Commissioner's website (<https://www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/ewss/index.aspx>). This material is updated from time to time and you should check for changes regularly.

53. Am I an eligible employer?

All ELC /SAC businesses registered with Tusla in accordance with Section 58C of the Child Care Act 1991 are included in the scheme with no turnover or orders test to be met.

Services must register for EWSS through ROS. This can be at any stage throughout the lifetime of the scheme. Registration applications will only be processed if the employer is registered for PAYE/PRSI as an employer, has a bank account linked to that registration, and has tax clearance. Where an employer files an EWSS payment submission without first registering for EWSS, it will be rejected in full. As registration cannot be backdated, it is imperative registration is undertaken prior to the first pay date in respect of which EWSS is being claimed.

54. What are the subsidy rates available?

Enhanced EWSS subsidy rates, which were introduced in response to Level 5 restrictions, will apply until end March 2021.

Enhanced subsidy rates are as follows:

Employee Gross Weekly Wage	Subsidy payable
Less than €151.50	Nil
From €151.50 to €202.99	€203
From €203 to €299,99	€250
From €300 to €399.99	€300
From €400 to €1,462	€350f
More than €1,462	Nil

The enhanced EWSS subsidy rates provide approximately 80% of payroll costs for participating ELC/SAC services, which equates to approximately 50% of the usual operating costs of these services.

Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19 from DEASP

55. What is the Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19?

When a worker is told to self-isolate / restrict movements by a doctor or the HSE due to being a probable source of infection or has been diagnosed with Covid-19 (Coronavirus) by a doctor, they can apply for an enhanced Illness Benefit payment of €350 per week.

All employees (other than some public sector employees who pay a modified rate of social insurance) and self-employed, including non-nationals and people living in Direct Provision, are entitled to claim and receive the enhanced Covid-19 Illness Benefit payment where conditions are met.

To be eligible for this payment a person must be confined to their home or a medical facility.

Phone your GP. Do not go to a GP surgery, pharmacy or hospital. The GP will assess you over the phone.

56. How do I qualify for the Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19?

To receive the enhanced payment, you must be:

- self-isolating/restricting movements on the instruction of a doctor or the HSE due to being a probable source of infection or diagnosed with Covid-19 (Coronavirus), and
- absent from work and confined to your home or a medical facility

An Illness Benefit claim form must be submitted (on line or by post) and a Certificate of Incapacity for Work must be provided by your GP or relevant HSE documentation provided.

To receive the enhanced payment, you must also be:

- aged between 18 and 66 years and

if employed

- have at least one paid qualifying social insurance contribution in the four weeks immediately before claiming the payment and
- have a contract of employment (if an employee)

if self-employed

- worked immediately before applying for the enhanced payment and will have reckonable income in the current contribution year

If you are ill for another reason and you can't work, you should apply for standard Illness Benefit. This requires a Certificate of Incapacity for Work and the submission of an application form (IB1).

Further information and details on how to apply are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/df55ae-how-to-apply-for-illness-benefit-for-covid-19-absences/>.

57. What is the rate of payment for the Enhanced Illness Payment for Covid-19?

The personal rate for this payment is €350 per week, as compared with the normal Illness Benefit rate of €203.

It will be paid for a maximum of 2 weeks where a person is self-isolating due to being a probable source of infection, and for a maximum of 10 weeks if a person has been diagnosed with Covid-19 (Coronavirus). If a person has been certified for less than 10 weeks, they will be paid for the duration of their certificate.

58. Does the DEASP Covid-19 Illness Benefit apply if a Covid-19 test result is negative?

Yes, enhanced rates apply where the submitted Certificate of Incapacity for Work indicates a Covid-19 illness that includes one of the two specific ICD codes.

59. Can the DEASP Covid-19 Illness Benefit be in respect of a shorter period than a week?

Yes, there are no waiting days applied to claims for the DEASP Covid-19 Illness benefit. Payment of €350 per week will issue on a pro-rata basis where less than one week. Again this is dependent on receipt of the Certificate of Incapacity for Work that includes one of the two specific ICD codes.

60. Does the DEASP Covid-19 Illness Benefit apply in the scenario where a GP decides it is not necessary for an individual to be tested/self-isolate but that individual may already have called in sick to work for a period?

No, payment for Covid-19 illness benefit claims is based on receipt of the Certificate of Incapacity for Work – with the relevant ICD code - and the IB1 claim application form. If a person is not required to self-isolate as a probable source of infection, the GP will not (should not) provide a Cert with the specified Covid-19 codes. When a person is ill the GP may, during their medical assessment, identify an 'other' illness/condition that necessitates absence from work and submit the Certificate of Incapacity for Work for that illness/condition. Claims should be made as soon as possible when a person becomes ill; however, claims may be accepted up to six weeks from the date of commencement of illness. The Certificate of Incapacity for Work for that illness/condition will not apply for the first 6 days of illness and will not apply the enhanced rates.

General information on the Covid Illness payment is available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/service/df55ae-how-to-apply-for-illness-benefit-for-covid-19-absences/>

Staffing issues and concerns

Guidance on HR and other resources on the First 5 webpage is currently being reviewed and revised.