

National Public Health Emergency Team

17th April 2020

Childcare Support for Essential Health Care Workers

Date Document Prepared: 16th April 2020

Paper Prepared by: Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA)

Action Required:

- For noting
- For discussion**
- For decision**

Childcare support for Essential Healthcare Workers

Summary:

1. As part of a suite of measures to attenuate the spread of COVID-19, the NPHE recommended the closure of schools, crèches and other childcare facilities. These measures came into effect on the evening of 12th March and remain in effect
2. While there is limited evidence that school and crèche closures were impacting on the availability of essential health workers to attend work at the outset of the measures, recent survey data from the HSE indicates that there is some demand for assistance in accessing or the cost of childcare.
3. To support the resilience of the health service workforce, a senior officials group comprising of officials from the Departments of the Taoiseach, Public Expenditure and Reform, Children and Youth Affairs, Education, Health and the HSE have reviewed this issue and recommended the following targeted and time limited childcare measures be introduced for **essential healthcare workers only**:
 - a. **Measures 1:** In circumstances where a parent/guardian/partner is an “essential healthcare worker”, the other parent/guardian/partner is supported by their employer to remain at home to care for the child(ren). It is acknowledged that this measure will not benefit one-parent/guardian families.
 - b. **Measure 2:** DCYA supported in-reach service where registered childcare workers provide support in an essential healthcare workers home
4. The timing of the introduction of the measures, and in particular measure 2, could be considered in the context of the decisions in relation to social distancing post 5 May.
5. The support would be made available until the 31st of May 2020 and subject to ongoing monitoring and review. Any extension beyond the 31st May would be considered and decided in advance of that date based on the restrictions applying at that time, the uptake and experience of the scheme to date.
6. It is estimated that based on HSE survey data (HSE Acute and Community Services only) that approximately 9,000 staff have identified a need for childcare – if not immediately, at some stage, if restrictions continue.
7. This matter was considered at the Cabinet Committee on Covid-19 on 16 April. However, no decisions were taken to introduce either measure.

Background

As part of a suite of measures to attenuate the spread of COVID-19, the NPHE recommended the closure of schools, crèches and other childcare facilities. These measures came into effect on the evening of 12th March. Consequently, since 12th March, working parents were required to make alternative arrangements for childcare.¹

At that time of the closure, there were approximately 220,000 children being cared for in crèche facilities, ranging from full-time care for younger children to after-school care for school-age children. There was almost 27,000 staff working directly with children.

Additionally, due to public health measures, parents who were relying on grandparents or other family members/friends for childcare, may no longer have that option available to them.

Scope of Essential Workers

While it was recognised by the group that the closure of creches and schools has impacted on many families, including essential workers, any measures introduced should be aligned to current public health advices including ensuring as many people as possible are staying at home. In addition, the need to support the resilience of the health service workforce to meet the increased demand associated with response to the Covid-19 pandemic is fully recognised by the group.

The group concluded therefore that the scope of this scheme should be limited to **Essential Healthcare Workers** only.

The DHealth/HSE has advised that it is not possible to distinguish between different categories of healthcare workers for the purposes of providing childcare and any childcare measures should apply to all essential healthcare workers working in the Health Service Executive, Section 38 and 39 Service Providers, the Private Nursing Home and Home Care sector. Outside of these employees in healthcare, essential workers in other sectors (e.g. other Health provision, AGS, retail workers) may also have childcare needs. While it is recommended to introduce support for this group of essential healthcare workers only, pressures will arise from other sectors.

At this juncture, it is considered necessary to consider a smaller pool as the wider the pool the more the public health risk increases. In addition, until we are clear on the level of capacity that a scheme might provide, there is a risk that demand could outstrip the capacity of the proposed arrangements to meet supply.

Demand for Childcare for Essential Healthcare Workers

HSE does not have data systems available to collect data on childcare requirements for its staff and all data is required to be collected manually for its 139,127 staff.

The HSE National HR surveyed HR leads across Acute and Community services, for the following data:

- A. Number of staff for whom childcare commitments has led to an inability to attend/fully attend work;
- B. Number of staff for whom childcare commitments is limiting their ability to commit to increasing hours to assist in the COVID-19 response; and

¹ DCYA has been advised that a *Covid 19 Childcare For Frontline Staff* facebook page resulted in 1,400 childcare placements for healthcare workers.

- C. Number of staff for whom childcare commitments is not currently limiting their ability to attend/ attend fully but is likely to in the longer term.

Based on responses to date, an overall estimate of the demand for childcare places is in the region of **8,898** staff. Of the 8,898 identified childcare needs, 4,028 provided a breakdown of need. 751 identified childcare commitments as currently leading to an inability to attend/fully attend work, 794 identified childcare commitments as currently limiting ability to commit to increasing hours and 2,483 identified that childcare commitments are not currently limiting ability to attend/fully attend work but is likely to in the longer term. 4,879 identified having a childcare need but did not provide a breakdown on the type of need (current or future). Further details are set out in Tables A and B provided by the HSE. This is likely to be a conservative estimate of demand.

The HSE analysis does not include health workers in the proposed for inclusion, specifically private nursing home and home care.

Proposed measures to run to 31 May and reviewed thereafter – for approval

The following measures are proposed. While the measures are complimentary, the date of implementation of measure 1 and measure 2 can be varied and should be considered in line with the broader discussion on social distancing measures post May 5..

1. Where a parent is an “essential healthcare worker”

It is considered essential that all measures that limit movement between households are exhausted before other measures are considered.

In circumstances where a parent/guardian/partners classified as an “essential worker”, the other parent/guardian/partner will be supported by their employer to remain at home to care for the child(ren):

- (i) For public sector workers: Government policy that public sector workers with a partner who is an essential worker would be facilitated and paid to remain at home to care for children on a full time basis, allowing the essential worker to continue be available to work (current and additional); and
- (ii) For private sector workers: A national appeal from Government to private sector businesses/employers to facilitate partners of an essential worker to remain at home on paid leave to care for children on a full time basis,

It is not proposed that there would be any financial incentive provided for this but that larger employers would be asked to sign up to support the “Ireland on Call” initiative of the HSE.

2. DCYA supported in-reach into homes of essential workers to support access

Where childcare remains an issue for some following implementation of measure 1, measure 2 is recommended, subject to public health advices. The measures would see qualified healthcare workers providing childcare in the homes of essential health care workers.

There were almost 27,000 qualified² childcare workers working in crèches at the time of their closure who may now be available to provide childcare in the homes of essential workers.

DCYA propose this option would operate as follows:

- Certain childcare providers would be called upon to volunteer to reactivate their service
- DCYA and Pobal will immediately start to approve expressions of interest (for example, ensuring they are compliant with regulation and not on Tusla's concerned list, that they have adequate capacity to meaningfully assist)
- The 30 CCCs, Pobal staff and a National Helpline are readied for action and to support services with queries
- DCYA distributes helpful resources re health and safety, COVID advices etc.
- "Essential" worker phones National Helpline/their local City / County Childcare Committee (CCC) and provides their personal details, their employer details and their childcare needs either (details on myccc.ie) National Helpline shares info with CCC.
- CCC has list of local approved services and matches parents needs with provider.
- Provider contacts parent and introduces childcare worker
- Outreach begins from agreed date
- Provider supervises childcare worker remotely, replaces staff member who gets sick, supports childcare worker of any emergency with the children arises, provide another staff member to cover unexpected long shift etc.
- DCYA has contracts with each provider, setting out scope of service and basic rules.

This measure would be subject to on-going monitoring of demand and uptake.

Outstanding issues

The DYCA has indicated that there is a lead-in time of approximately 1 week for measure 2 and that there are a number of outstanding issues to be resolved (including insurance and compatibility with the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS)).

Other options considered:

Crèche Reopening

Reopening of a limited number of crèches is not under active consideration at present but may be considered further as restrictions are eased. This would have implications for the ongoing feasibility of this proposed scheme.

A list and voucher system

The option of making payments to essential workers to enable them pay for their own childcare, confined to a list of approved childcare practitioners was also considered. However, such a scheme was determined to be administratively complex from a provider and family perspective and appropriate controls would need to be put in place to ensure there is no double subsidisation. On balance, the option set out above was considered the preferred approach.

² All staff caring for children must have a qualification in early childhood at Level 5. 25% of the staff have degrees in early learning and care.