

Project Overview:

Dealing with the Pandemic: the case of early years and school age childcare providers in Ireland



Aims and Methodology

In summer 2020, Early Childhood Ireland completed a new qualitative interview project with our members. We sought to examine the impact the closure of childcare settings had on the sector, explore the effectiveness of the Covid-19 supports for the childcare sector and investigate their plans to re-open their settings.

We selected a sample of our members in various setting types across the country, weighted for more common setting types and geography and conducted in-depth online interviews. These interviews were then transcribed, coded and the findings written up as a report which you can access here. One of the purposes of this study was to explore how the policy choices made by the government have impacted the childcare sector during the pandemic, and how providers see the post-Covid reality for their work.

Key Findings

Staffing and the future of the Wage Subsidy Scheme

One of the main issues that was repeatedly highlighted by interviewees was the fact that they would be unable to retain the current Covid required ratios without the continued support of the wage subsidy scheme. Childcare providers are allowed participate in the scheme without having to meet the criteria required by other businesses, but the scheme is due to expire in January 2021. The special measures for the childcare sector amount to an admission by government that it cannot operate like other parts of the economy and additional funding must be made available to address this fact.

Sector Diversity

Many providers raised the issue of the fact that the supports being offered did not take sufficient account of the diversity of the childcare sector, including of challenges that specific types of settings face in different parts of the country. For example, the Overhead Payment that was offered as part of the initial package of Covid-19 measures did not cover as much in urban areas where costs were higher. Similarly, when it came to the regulations, certain types of providers felt that their concerns and issues were not being addressed. A "one size fits all" approach cannot be used in future policy measures.

Child & Staff Wellbeing

Interviewees pointed to the inevitable prospect of children and staff falling ill with non-Covid illnesses having to take time off to recuperate as a potential major challenge. Staffing remains a serious issue for the sector and sourcing replacement and cover staff is likely to pose a huge challenge in the context of Covid. When it comes to children, providers questioned how they could be expected to differentiate between Covid and non Covid illnesses especially in the absence of fast testing turnaround and the impact this would have on their settings to operate. This will be exacerbated when the discretionary approach around hours of attendance linked to scheme funding is due to end in January 2021.

These findings will help to guide Early Childhood Ireland's policy considerations for the immediate term, such as Budget 2021, and beyond.