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



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List of Abbreviations

CCC	City/County Childcare Committees
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCDEI	Department of Children, Disability, Equality and Integration
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education Scheme
ELC	Early Learning and Care
EWSS	Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme
PUP	Pandemic Unemployment Payment
SAC	School Age Childcare
TWCSS	Temporary Wage Childcare Subsidy Scheme
TWSS	Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has utterly changed the way life is lived all over the world. To safeguard public health, many countries were closed down for several weeks or even months. During this time only a skeleton of essential services could operate. At the time of writing, most of these countries have either completed, or are proceeding through a phased reopening of the economy. New ways of living are emerging, as we are learning to coexist with the threat of the disease.

In Ireland, childcare has been brought back to the centre of the public debate, as the country was not able to guarantee a smooth functioning of early years and school-age care provision during the lockdown. The importance of having a robust and efficient childcare system for the functioning of the rest of society and the economy became more evident than ever. As the pandemic was unfolding, policymakers were taking on the responsibility to protect the system from the financial hit of the shutdown and the uncertainties of reopening.

Within this context, the objectives of this study are twofold: (1) to identify the strategies used by early years and school-age care providers in Ireland to deal with the lockdown, along with the respective rationales for action, and (2) to identify their main concerns and considerations about reopening. Based on providers' views, the study provides a snapshot of how the sector has been affected by the pandemic and how the emerging challenges intertwine with pre-existing structural barriers to prevent the sector from operating effectively. We believe that the Covid-19 emergency has the potential to be a catalyst of a new Social Contract, that will improve the prospects of the Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School Age Childcare (SAC) sector not just during, but beyond the crisis period. The success of this new contract is dependent on it being considerate of the voices of stakeholders.

After this introduction, section 2 describes in detail the policy developments relevant to the sector that unfolded from the lockdown period to the end of July 2020. The methodology is laid out subsequently. Section 4 discusses the results and the last section concludes.

2. Policy context

The Irish government introduced a range of new income supports and wage subsidies to help the economy during the Covid-19 lockdown. The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was the first to be introduced. PUP was a 12-week non means-tested unemployment benefit that provided support to all individuals who lost their jobs on or after 13 March at a rate of €203 per week. That value was increased to €350 per week from March 24. On March 26, the government announced the implementation of a Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), which was a 12-week support to employers who would otherwise had been forced to lay off staff due to the pandemic. Under the TWSS, Revenue subsidised up to 70% of the net wages of employees, up to a maximum of €410 net per week. The primary aim of the TWSS was to retain employment ties during the lockdown (Beirne et al, 2020). On May 4 the scheme was reformed, and the percentage paid by the government started to be based on the previous weekly take home pay for each employee. The subsidy for low wage earners¹ was increased to 85% (Citizens Information, 2020).

The survival of ELC/SAC settings was especially concerning, as the sector had been facing a long-lasting funding and staffing crisis before the pandemic emerged (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2017). On March 12, ELC and SAC services were closed. During the initial closure period, payments under DCYA's funding programmes continued². From April 6, DCYA implemented the Temporary Wage Childcare Subsidy Scheme (TWCSS), which replaced the income stream coming from pre-existent programmes. The change in funding was justified by the government as a way to ensure the financial viability of settings which were more dependent on parental fees, and to ensure that workers would be protected. The TWCSS was opened to any provider who had been contracted with the Department to operate DCYA funded ELC/SAC programmes as of 12 March 2020. It complemented the subsidy provided by the Revenue, up to a limit of €586 per week. In the case of staff whose regular weekly wage was below €350, DCYA topped up wages to €350 net per week, meaning that all staff was encouraged to remain with their employer rather than signing up for PUP (DCYA, 2020a). In other words, the government took over the wage bill from providers. In addition, services were entitled to receive support for overhead payments, mounting to 15% of eligible staff gross weekly pay, with a minimum payment of €300 per

1 Workers whose previous average take home pay was below €412 per week.

2 Including ECCE, NCS, CCS, TEC and AIM funding programmes.

week. In the specific case of self-employed providers (company directors/sole traders/partners) with no employees, although they had access to the DCYA overhead payment, they could not access the wage subsidies³. In general, participation on the scheme was subject to providers not charging fees or accepting voluntary contributions from parents, retaining children's places and encouraging staff to engage in CPD during the closure period. According to DCYA (2020b), 85% of settings signed up to the Scheme. The TWCSS was first set up to last for the initial duration of the TWSS, i.e. until 18 June⁴, but that was extended to June 28.

The survival of ELC/SAC settings was not solely dependent on their ability to survive the shutdown period. Settings have had to fundamentally reorganise their activities after the lockdown measures were relaxed, so as to match the demands of a new society. In Ireland, a staged reopening plan was announced on May 1st. According to that initial plan, early years settings were to reopen for the children of essential workers on June 29. On July 20, settings were to reopen for all workers on a phased basis, for example, starting at one day per week and with a gradual increase.

On May 7, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs announced an additional part of the reopening roadmap, which was the Temporary Childcare Scheme for Essential Health Workers. Under the scheme, registered services were asked to consider offering childcare in those families' homes. Participation in the scheme was to happen on a voluntary basis and provision would start on May 18. However, the scheme was cancelled after only six providers applied to join. The DCYA attributed the low uptake to a variety of factors, such as availability of insurance cover, concerns about virus transmission, difficulties in meeting employer responsibilities in relation to breaks and rest periods, and concerns about a lack of protection for staff working alone (DCYA, 2020c). The government was heavily criticised at the time for failing to support thousands of frontline workers who were struggling to manage their professional and family responsibilities with early years settings being closed (Burns and Clarke, 2020). Representatives of healthcare workers also criticised the lack of reimbursement for childcare paid for during lockdown and the lack of reimbursement for annual leave taken due to childcare responsibilities (INMO, 2020).

On May 29 a new plan for reopening was released. While the initial plan stated that services would only resume for children of essential workers, the new strategy widened the eligibility criteria to all those in need of childcare. In addition to children of frontline workers, children that had a place in the service before the closure, vulnerable children⁵ (including children with disabilities), and children of working parents were allowed to return. Services were asked to prioritise the children of essential workers in case of capacity constraints (DCYA, 2020d).

Until there is an effective treatment or vaccine, the operation of an early years setting will require a long-term need for a form of physical distancing, good hand and respiratory hygiene and self-isolation if there is a suspicion of infection. Services were asked to implement a number of measures to limit the risk of infection, including the following: ensuring those with symptoms do not enter the service; not allowing any unnecessary visitors; ensuring that children learn good hand washing and respiratory techniques; ensuring thorough cleaning procedures; washing toys regularly; utilising outside spaces more intensively; and grouping children together in smaller groups with the same staff members – the so-called "play-pods" (Tusla, 2020).

Promoting a safe reopening that maintained operational and financial sustainability required the development of a new temporary funding model. The model was announced on June 10 and ran from June 29 to August 23. Access to this temporary funding package was not dependent on previous participation on the TWCSS during the lockdown. One of the conditions of the funding package was that providers did not increase fees from pre-Covid levels. It contained four elements (DCYA, 2020b):

1. A once-off reopening support payment for DCYA-funded providers opening between 29 June and early September. This was aimed at covering operational costs, such as additional staffing costs, provision of training to staff, purchase of additional learning resources to children, and purchase of hygiene and cleaning products. The amounts received by each provider was based on the number of children on DCYA schemes in the service before the closures;
2. A once-off Covid-19 capital grant for DCYA-funded providers opening between 29 June and early September, aimed at improving hygiene facilities and outdoor play areas;

3 They were allowed to access PUP.

4 On 23 June 2020, Revenue extended the TWSS to 31 August 2020.

5 As recognised under the National Childcare Scheme and other DCYA childcare schemes.

3. Continuation of the Revenue-operated TWSS until the end of August for services that reopened on June 29;
4. Resumption of all DCYA funding schemes⁶.

The DCYA also pointed to two further potential sources of financial support for settings reopening during the summer: first, the supports available for community services experiencing sustainability issues via case management. The case management system is jointly managed by Pobal and the local City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) and existed prior to the Covid crisis. Second, the restart grants made available through the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation (DBEI) to small businesses that are eligible to pay rates. According to the Department, 85% of services that are normally open over the summer did so (DCYA, 2020e).

In late June, a new coalition government was formed. The former DCYA became the Department of Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (DCDEI). On July 23, a €7.4 billion Jobs Stimulus package was launched to support the reopening of businesses across the economy (Department of Finance, 2020). The package included the replacement of the TWSS by the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) from September 1st. The EWSS will consist of a flat subsidy paid out at different rates and will include new hires and seasonal workers who were not covered under the TWSS. Both the TWSS and the EWSS ran in parallel from July 31 until the end of August precisely to include new eligible workers. In order to qualify for the scheme, employers have to demonstrate that their turnover between July and December 2020 is equivalent to 70% or less when compared to the same period in the previous year. Drawing on the national package, In July 25, Roderic O’Gorman, the new DCDEI’s Minister, launched the July Stimulus Funding Package for the ELC/SAC sector. The financial supports available for settings from August 24 to the end of 2020 are concentrated in the following three areas (DCYA, 2020e):

1. Continuation of all subsidy schemes and resumption of the ECCE programme at existing capitation and subsidy rates, including ECCE higher capitation;
2. Access to the EWSS, with the sector being exempted from the 70% turnover rule, which applies in other sectors;
3. A sustainability fund to all providers (not-for-profit and for-profit) who can demonstrate that the other measures are not sufficient to enable viable operation of their business.

Similar to the June package, the government has also pointed to other supports that may be available to some settings, as small businesses⁷. The package for the sector also included changes to administrative procedures related to attendance rules, to account for the operational changes and disruptions in usage caused by the disease.

To sum up, in extraordinary times, it is undeniable that there has been unprecedented support from government to protect the ELC/SAC sector from the instability of the crisis. The interviews collected in this study help to form a clearer picture of the successes and missteps of this policy effort, from the point of view of a range of providers. They also point to what the sector needs to move forward.

3. Methodology

A qualitative enquiry based on one-to-one semi-structured interviews was employed. This approach allows for obtaining in-depth and contextualised insights into how participants have dealt with the crisis and how they perceive the challenges of the future.

Sample size

There are no strict rules for sample size in qualitative research. Sample size depends on current knowledge, the purpose of the enquiry and what can be achieved with the available time and resources. Therefore, we followed Patton (2002), who recommends setting a minimum sample at the beginning of the project, based on expected reasonable coverage of the phenomenon. We initially chose a sample size of 20 participants. As the data generated from those interviews conveyed a rich and detailed coverage of the phenomenon of interest, it was not necessary to add new cases.

⁶ NCS, CCS and TEC.

⁷ Which include “the Credit Guarantee Scheme; the 6-month waiver of commercial rates; the restart grant for enterprises; the early carry-back of trading losses for previously profitable companies; the new income tax relief for self-employed individuals who were profitable in 2019 but, as a result of the COVID 19 pandemic, incur losses in 2020; legislation for the previously announced warehousing of tax liabilities; liquidity and enterprise investment measures provided via MicroFinance Ireland and LEOs” (DCYA, 2020e)

Sampling strategy

As early years and school-age care services in Ireland are offered by a diverse range of settings, which are spread across the country, the development of a deep and inclusive understanding requires that our analysis captures a great deal of variation. The *maximum variation* sampling allows for that analysis, as it draws on a small sample of great diversity. This strategy yields two types of findings: detailed descriptions of each case, which are useful for documenting uniqueness; and important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of difference.

The sample was selected in a way to include providers that were as different from each other as possible, according to the following variables: service type; private or community; urban or rural and region of the country. Participants were recruited from Early Childhood Ireland's membership base, which in May 2020 had 3,480 providers⁸. The sample had the following characteristics:

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Reference Number	Service type	Ownership type	Region	Area
#1	Full Day-care	Private	Leinster – excluding Dublin	Rural: town/village
#2	School age childcare	Private	Leinster – excluding Dublin	Rural: town/village
#3	Sessional with linked school age	Community	Munster	Rural: town/village
#4	Full Day-care	Private	Leinster - Dublin	Commuter area
#5	Full Day-care	Private	Leinster - Dublin	Urban: town
#6	Full Day-care	Community	Munster	Rural: countryside
#7	Full Day-care	Private	Connaught	Rural: town/village
#8	Full Day-care	Private	Munster	Urban: large city
#9	Sessional	Private	Leinster - Dublin	Commuter area
#10	Sessional	Community	Leinster – excluding Dublin	Urban: town
#11	Full Day-care	Private	Leinster – excluding Dublin	Commuter area
#12	Sessional with linked school age	Private	Ulster	Rural: town/village
#13	Full Day-care	Private	Ulster	Urban: town
#14	Part-time Day-care	Private	Connaught	Urban: large city
#15	Full Day-care	Community	Leinster - Dublin	Urban: large city
#16	Sessional	Private	Leinster – excluding Dublin	Rural: town/village
#17	Full Day-care	Private	Leinster - Dublin	Commuter area
#18	Sessional	Private	Munster	Rural: town/village
#19	Part-time with linked school age	Community	Connaught	Rural: countryside
#20	Full Day-care	Private	Leinster - Dublin	Rural: town/village

Procedure

Two lists of participants were created based on the pre-selected variables for sampling, each one with 20 members. The first 20 members were invited to take part in the study via e-mail, which had an information sheet and a consent form attached. Individuals who did not respond or who opted out were substituted by a participant with similar characteristics on the second list.

Those who agreed to participate received a second email, asking them to state their preferred time and date for the interview. The email also contained a few questions that covered basic characteristics of the setting and strategies that have been used to manage the crisis. These questions were answered before the interview took place and provided information that was used to tailor the interview to each individual case.

All interviews were led by a member of Early Childhood Ireland's staff. Each interview lasted between 20
8 Although the numbers vary constantly, according to Pobal (2019), in 2018/2019 the total number of ELC/SAC services in Ireland contracted to deliver at least one DCYA programme was 4,598. This total excludes services which do not receive public subsidies.

and 50 minutes. Following health and safety guidelines, they were conducted and recorded online via Zoom. Interviews were afterwards transcribed verbatim.

Research ethics

All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and about how their data would be used, what potential risks were involved and gave written consent about being interviewed and audio recorded. During the transcription process, all data was fully anonymised, removing any references to individuals, locations or terms that could have identified the participant. Furthermore, only basic characteristics of the providers interviewed are included in this report.

The project only recorded a minimum amount of information necessary to address the research questions. All data was stored in a secure location that could only be accessed by members of the research team in Early Childhood Ireland who were directly involved in the project. All data, including recordings and transcriptions, were destroyed after completion of the project.

Data analysis

Conventional content analysis was used to code the interview data, which is an inductive strategy suited to cases in which the existing literature on the phenomenon being studied is very limited (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). As such, the coding system emerged from the data. The codes were assessed according to their internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity, to ensure that there was no overlap between them (Patton, 2002). The codes were then grouped into more general categories (Sgier, 2012).

To ensure consistency and credibility of the analysis, an analyst triangulation strategy was used. The coding system was counterchecked by a second researcher, and initial results were extensively discussed with other staff members of Early Childhood Ireland who performed the interviews.

The first interview took place on June 8 and the last on August 17. As most interviews preceded the announcement of the July funding package, that topic was not included in the analysis and will be the subject of future investigations. For participants that had already reopened at the time of the interview, their concerns moving forward were included in the analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Strategies used to manage the lockdown

Staff lay off decisions

There were two most common strategies used by participants regarding staff lay-off decisions following the announcement of the settings closure on 12 March. One was an immediate (or nearly immediate) lay-off and subsequent re-hiring once the TWCSS was announced. The decision to lay-off staff was prompted by a combination of high uncertainty around the length of the closures and limited or insufficient funds. In addition, laying off staff during the summer months has become a normalised practice in the sector, which therefore shaped a reaction that simply resembled what is done during normal circumstances.

"When I look back now, and I think because you were doing our preschool service and parents were coming to pick up their children and saying you are closed. That was the first time I heard about it. I was in total shock. When my staff was leaving to go home, I was going, I actually don't have a clue what is going to happen. I did not have the funds to keep paying them."
(#12 Private, Full Day-care, Ulster, rural)

"It was, basically, it was a reaction it was "Oh My God" we knew, I suppose we operate on such a tight margin profit wise anyway so it's very simple, I know that if we have no income we can't afford to pay staff (...) we were never going to charge parents."
(#8, Private, Full Day-care, Munster, Urban)

"I went on RTÉ player, whatever, and saw that we were being announced that we were being closed for two weeks. So my immediate reaction was if it could be two weeks it could be ten weeks I had no idea

(...) so I did up a letter on headed paper, from experience where you say you might be letting a staff go for the summer, for example, I know that the job seekers look for the last day that you worked.”
(#8, Private, Full Day-care, Munster, Urban)

However, most participants did not lay off staff, including all community providers interviewed. In these cases, providers reported that, at the time of the closures, they had sufficient financial resources to keep paying staff for a limited period of time, and the uncertainties about the length of the closures were mitigated by government’s promises of financial support. Retaining staff was especially important for providers that had been focusing on reducing turnover previously, viewed as key to high quality provision.

“So, when we were, I suppose, before it was announced that we’d be shutting, we met with the Treasurer and the chairperson, and not knowing what length of time at that stage that we’d be shut but we agreed anyway that we could fund the staff for 80% of the wages anyway for 2 weeks and we would review it then. At that time there was talk about the wage subsidy scheme coming in, so we ended up paying only for 1 week the 80% and we just felt that, I suppose, it was important to keep the staff on board (...) So when the wage subsidy scheme came, we just decided that that was the way forward for us as long as we could do it. So, we were lucky enough that we had the money in the bank to pay the wages for those few weeks”
(#6 Community, Full Day-care, Munster, Rural)

“Initially we only thought we were going to be closed for a couple of weeks and then when we thought it was getting longer, the government said they would step in and help the childcare industry to keep their staff on. I gave them [the staff] the option to see what they wanted to do and I said you can go now and sign on and get the Covid pandemic payment but that the DCYA said that they will do the same if they stayed employed (...)”
(#14 Private, Part-time day-care, Connaught, Urban)

“I think it was a combination of things, like, we’ve worked very hard to have certain level of retention, and quality, staff to have here. So, I wasn’t giving them up very easy, that’s for sure.”
(#5 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster, Urban)

The few participants who reported having laid-off staff without rehiring them afterwards were the ones who decided not to sign up for the TWCSS, which is a theme that will be explored next.

Participation in the Temporary Wage Childcare Subsidy Scheme

As previously mentioned, the take-up rate of the TWCSS corresponded to approximately 85%, according to the Department. This means that while the vast majority of early years providers considered that signing up for the scheme was financially advantageous, a non-negligible 15% of providers thought differently. Investigating their rationales is of great importance, as an eventual mass withdrawal from the market would strongly impact supply.

In our sample, four interviewees decided not to take part in the TWCSS. In most of these cases, a combination of factors explains the decision-making process. On the one hand, there was an uncertainty surrounding the length of the closures, given that the shorter the period, the less someone would miss out on the benefits of participating. On the other, there was a lack of clarity on the financial terms of the agreement, and on the general information being given by the Department, which generated uncertainty around the scheme itself. This lack of clarity created confusion, which was compounded by some sharing on social media of conflicting information. Another participant did not join the scheme because the service was not eligible, as it did not previously operate DCYA funded programmes. This specific case evidences another important shortcoming of the support, as it excluded settings which were not in receipt of government subsidies before the pandemic, which is especially common for school-age care settings.

“I wasn’t too sure about, to me there was a lot of grey areas. I spoke to the company’s accountants and they actually highlighted too there was a lot of grey areas, we didn’t know how Revenue was going to tax us at the end of the year, if they were going to try and recoup (...) So I suppose there was way too much uncertainty about the scheme and then I suppose my whole position was I didn’t know what was going to happen. I mean ideally first it was for 2 weeks and then it ran on. I mean, like, nobody knew it was

going to be for 3 months that we were going to be shut down.”
(#13, Private, Sessional, Ulster, Urban)

“Yeah, I was so confused because I’m on lots of different WhatsApp groups (...) I’m not joking, hundreds of messages on a daily basis that I found it a bit overwhelming and we were getting information from one group that was contradicting information from another group. I just wasn’t really sure what to do so I rang my accountant and he was saying, “I’m not really sure what your situation from your end of things (...) I definitely would have made a different decision, I just didn’t think the information was there and it kept being changed and updated (...) we didn’t kind of feel comfortable or confident that the information we were being given was correct and right”
(#20 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster)

TWCSS – Operational difficulties

Amongst the participants who joined the TWCSS, complaints about operational difficulties related to the Scheme were recurrent. They referred to a variety of issues, including: understanding the language used in the documents; understanding the rules (for example, if the wages payed via the scheme could coexist with other benefits from the social welfare system); having to keep track of information coming from various sources, and at unusual times; the lack of breakdown of DCYA payments, which did not discriminate between wages and top-up payments; and difficulties in sorting the non-standard employee cases, such as of the ones who had been on maternity leave. A strong sense of disappointment was also expressed by self-employed sole traders whose payments were not in the payroll, and therefore could not access the wage subsidies. The excerpts below portray the frustration that was caused by having to sort the operational requirements of the scheme:

“I think, with the wage subsidy scheme, we just got that nailed down in the last week because there were a few issues. That was, it was a lot of to-ing and fro-ing between the Revenue and the DCYA in relation to all of the staff for various reasons. That was quite stressful. I wouldn’t care to be by myself without a finance department and a HR department.”
(#10 Community, Sessional, Leinster, Urban)

“It was just initially, when I would open an email and I’d just be praying that there wouldn’t be something else that I’d have to do, or else I’d miss this subsidy, or this support, or this grant. And then because they were coming in from all different avenues, obviously you get something in from yourselves [Early Childhood Ireland] or you get something in from DCYA, you get something in from the county childcare committee (...) Nearly by 5 o clock every Friday, [Minister] Zappone would announce something - ‘I’ll just drop it here’, so you can’t do anything about it over the weekend”
(#5 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster, Urban)

TWCSS – Overheads

The diversity of perceptions regarding the appropriateness of the 15% support for overhead costs are an illuminating reflection of the diversity of the sector. Respondents were mostly divided between considering that the “top-up” helped a great deal with outgoings and considering that it helped a little. Among the latter group, and among respondents who thought that the support did not help at all, there was a prevailing perception that the support was not sufficient for providers who had to pay rent or a mortgage, which was especially problematic in Dublin.

“We are actually covering our costs properly.”
(#10 Community, Sessional, Leinster, Urban)

“I’m lucky I am on the grounds of a school. I don’t have massive outgoings, but if I had a mortgage to pay or I had to pay rates it would not have gone anywhere close to it.”
(#14, Private, Part time Day-care, Connaught, Urban)

“I rent in Dublin. (...) I mean I’m a small crèche, but my expenses would be a lot different to somebody outside Dublin. But there was nothing proportionate in the amount of money that you got for running costs. My rent is €4,500 per month.”
(#17 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster, Commuter area)

Other strategies

In addition to the TWCSS, other financial and non-financial strategies were used by providers to manage the lockdown period. First, participants actively pursued varied cost reduction strategies, such as mortgage deferrals and cancelling waste collection and water and heating provision. Second, participants kept active communication with parents, getting them informed on the latest developments, and with children, who were often receiving pedagogical material to work with at home, and even participating in online graduations in some cases. Third, active communication was kept with staff as well. The interviews suggest that a positive relationship existed between providers and staff during that period, as the scheme allowed for wages to be paid in full, and sometimes were even increased with the wage supports in place.

"Every day, every single day we sent, we kept with the curriculum, they're sent their colouring, and they send videos back to us of what they found around the house beginning with certain letters or different colours, so the parents are delighted and the kids are delighted."
(#4 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster, Commuter area)

"We've been having our weekly team meetings via Zoom or video chat and using that time to reflect on our practices and plan forward."
(#10 Community, Sessional, Leinster, Urban)

"Most people were happy, you know, most staff were happy, they were getting their full pay, they were staying engaged on."
(#8 Private, Full Day-care, Munster, Urban)

4.2 Concerns about reopening

Level of uptake

The various levels of concern around the level of uptake upon reopening also reflect the diversity of early years and school-age care provision in Ireland. The interviews suggest that geography plays an important role. Rural providers demonstrated bigger concerns regarding the level of demand for their services upon reopening.

"We don't know who's coming back or who's not coming back. A few parents have already contacted me to say they won't be going back into offices until January next year, like maybe they'll be working at home so they're not going to need services."
(#3 Community, Sessional with linked school age service, Munster, rural)

"When I say that I am very lucky here, it is one creche, we are a mile, less than a mile from the nearest hospital (...) We are an extremely busy urban centre, so I can probably open financially feasibly on the 29th (...) but I am part of a bigger group and the rural, they are really absolutely up against it. There is very little, very little uptake for the 29th"
(#8, Private, Full Day-care, Munster, Urban)

"well, I am fully booked out, I had one parent there yesterday saying that she is not taking the place (...). I hope to have 19 but I mightn't, it's not set in stone yet."
(#9 Private, Sessional, Leinster, Commuter area)

Children's wellbeing

Providers repeatedly expressed various concerns surrounding the physical and mental health of children upon reopening of settings. First, worries about their mental health were related to the fact that the lockdown period utterly changed their routines and settling back into the old one might be equally distressing. They were not around many children during the lockdown and were in close contact with their parents for an extended period of time. Interviewees worried that a separation anxiety might affect both children and parents, which is complicated by the fact that parents will not be allowed to enter the setting's premises. Secondly, providers questioned how they could be expected to differentiate between Covid and non Covid illnesses in the absence of fast testing turnaround. As a result, some fear that the health guidelines might create tensions in the relationship between providers and parents. More

generally, the guidelines would bring about many changes, and the process of adaptation to the new functioning of settings was pointed as a source of tension in the relationship with parents during the preparations for reopening. Lastly, participants highlighted that because of the lockdown, which closed early years settings in early March, children's readiness for schools might have been affected. This could influence their adaptation and performance upon reopening of schools.

"For us my main concerns, the health and safety of the children as well, I don't know myself if it's very quick for children to transition, because all they are used at the moment is to be home with their parents (...) they're gonna be very anxious, for both the parents and the children. And the staff as well, trying to settle them, and you don't want it to be a traumatic experience for them. If you are not allowing parents into the building (...) They'll be more dependent on their parents than they ever were, because some of our smaller children will never have been with their parents for this long, ever!"

(#6 Community, Full Day-care, Munster, Rural)

"So you know with the children, if they have a temperature, they've got to be sent home for two weeks, not gonna work either, because they're gonna have temperatures, they are teething, everything (...). That wouldn't work for parents."

(#6 Community, Full Day-care, Munster, Rural)

"I feel the preschool class, even to get a little bit of time before. Some of them were not ready for National School in March when we closed. I don't know how they are going to be ready now in September."

(#12 Private, Full Day-care, Ulster, rural)

Staffing

Respondents considered that, upon reopening, staff will be off more frequently, due to health and safety guidelines, and many of the workers who would've normally taken their holidays during the summer will do so later in the year. In addition, the reopening requirements on pods and cleaning procedures created new staffing demands. The prevailing perception was that because of these reasons the Covid-19 crisis will exacerbate the recruitment crisis that has existed in the sector in recent years – a situation that is even more severe in rural areas.

"Annual leave as well, that's been accruing. So let's say from September there's no way...staff we'll be out sick we'll struggle anyway, there are no relief panels in rural areas. So we struggled, this past year we got through it ok but the year before we struggled very badly trying to get staff."

(#6 Community, Full Day-care, Munster, Rural)

"It's so hard if someone is out sick, and all the extra cleaning, we'll have to pay for all of that. And with such a high risk that some might be out sick or whatever, or might have to go into isolation, to have an extra staff member there as a backup will really help."

(#18 Private, Sessional, Munster, Rural)

"Some of the children go home at 1 o'clock, so if at the end of the day we have 5 children from 2 or 3 different groups we would bring them all together. But now with the notion of pods, we cannot do that. So if we have 1 child left in our care after Montessori, if we have 2 in our nursery, we'd still have to staff 2 rooms."

(#1 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster, Rural)

Guidelines

Many participants expressed confusion over the reopening guidelines. They believed that the official guidelines were too open to interpretation. In addition, there were multiple sources of information, being published at different points in time, which added to the confusion. In the particular case of afterschool services, participants complained about the lack of specific guidelines for them. Lastly, participants were concerned about the post-Covid inspection system – given that the guidelines were to an extent open to interpretation, how compliance will be assessed was not yet clear to them.

"I find online, I've been looking through things constantly, and it's a minefield."

(#19 Community, Part time with linked school age, Rural)

"Yeah, more concrete and more clearer, the documents that were coming in every day, they're coming in from everywhere (...) it's coming from the department, its coming from the union, its coming from everywhere, there's nothing set in stone as of yet."
(#4 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster, Commuter area)

"On Friday, First5, brought out new guidelines, we've been open a month, new guidelines, I have to sit down and rewrite so many. I don't have enough to be doing at the moment."
(#17 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster, Commuter area)

"Even without Covid, everything is early childhood-centred, and there are very few guidelines for after schools. Even our guidelines are telling us to go by the preschool regulations, but they don't all fit."
(#2 Private, School age, Rural)

Logistic arrangements

At the time of the interviews, participants were actively planning and developing the logistics of reopening. Despite the confusion to interpret the official guidelines, a variety of logistical arrangements were cited. These included increased usage of outdoor areas, reorganisation of internal space, reorganisation of gates and entrances for staggered drop offs, introducing daily temperature checks and reinforcing sanitation procedures among the children and staff. Concerns were raised on the practical operation of pods, as restricting the movement and interactions of children could unsettle them. Being able to keep the setting clear of the virus was also a concern, especially amongst participants who belonged to risk groups.

"We have a very good outdoor area, the only thing we'd like to get done is the sheltered area, that would be appropriate for children when they are outside if the weather is bad"
(#19 Community, Part time with linked school age, Rural)

"We have a big back garden where they go out separately there anyway so there's no problem there but how do you tell a child "no you can't play with Anna today because you're in a different group"
(#4 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster, Commuter area)

"I suppose just I am just very worried about keeping the disease out of the place. I am very very worried about keeping the virus out, I am asthmatic myself so I am kind of thinking - if something happens to me in here I do feel particularly vulnerable"
(#8 Private, Full Day-care, Munster, Urban)

Reopening funding supports

The funding package created to support the immediate reopening, from end of June to end of August, was generally well received by participants who reopened in June. The Wage Subsidy Scheme in particular was seen as essential to sustain the staffing requirements within a Covid scenario. One important issue was raised, concerning the fact that, once again, settings that were not funded by DCYA before the pandemic were left out of the package.

At the time of the interviews, concerns were raised regarding the lack of clarity on the supports that will be in place from September onwards, which prevented participants from doing a long-term business planning. In the specific case of ECCE-only services⁹, the resumption of the government schemes in September was the main concern.

"I mean, we're actually getting money now, they're going to continue with the wage subsidy scheme up until August. But, sure look, you're never going to please everybody. But to me, I thought it was fabulous"
(#13, Private, Sessional, Ulster, Urban)

"Because of the pod system the amount of staff we need is absolutely ridiculous (...) We can do it while the refund scheme is on but once that's its finished we can't do that."
(#17 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster, Commuter area)

"It's good for the short-term from what I can see, but I nearly think that long-term its giving us a false sense of security, because I was really questioning whether to re-open the service altogether, and now

9 Services that only operate under the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme.

I'm thinking "oh we can", but what I'm worried about now is that we come back now for the two months and things hit the fan in September, where am I left then?"
(#11, Private, Full Day-care, Leinster, Commuter area)

"I think as an ECCE service once the scheme is reinstated we'll be fine in relation to funding and that aspect so I wouldn't have any concerns in relation to funding and finances."
(#10 Community, Sessional, Leinster, Urban)

Relationship with government

In the case of private providers, the interviews revealed a tense relationship with the government. On the one hand, there is a sector that generally requires state funding to function, which inevitably comes with some degree of state control over this investment. On the other, there are owners of private businesses who consider that the degree of control is excessive and involves dealing with multiple bureaucracies. This is perceived as disproportionate to the level of public funding received, which is considered to be too low. One of the participants believed that this relationship is expected to get even more complicated as the Covid crisis will require increased state support, and therefore increased government intervention. The best strategy to restore balance is not unanimously agreed. While for some participants the level of control is too high regardless, for others an increase in the level of funding would ease the relationship with the government.

"They [the government] are always getting back to Norway and Sweden, Scandinavia, how they do it, why can't they fund childcare in this country like they do over there? (...) I must get 30 emails a day, you literally have to read through 38 pages to try and decipher how just to press a button on some portal somewhere. (...) What they are asking from us, what they are expecting from us and what we get, it just doesn't add up."

(#9 Private, Sessional, Leinster, Commuter area)

"I think the Government are going to have to get very involved in supporting them [the sector] but I also think that the Government are way too involved in our sector so that's the other side of it (...) I am just sick to death of all the schemes, sick to death of the paper work, I feel that the Government is more in control of my business at the moment than I am, I didn't feel that way 10 years ago."

(#8, Private, Full Day-care, Munster, Urban)

"They could have mine [business] at this stage, I'd hand it over [to the government]."
(#20 Private, Full Day-care, Leinster)

Stress and anxiety

Many participants reported that work was a major source of stress and anxiety. Those feelings are rooted on the structural deficiencies that the sector had been facing previous to Covid, such as insufficient funding, staffing crisis, the high volume of unpaid work hours, insurance, among other concerns. In the private sector specifically, those deficiencies ultimately threaten the sustainability of businesses. With Covid, this sustainability is further threatened. A number of participants reported that a permanent withdrawal from the sector was an option.

"I've been there for 15 years, I love the job, I love working with the children, but I'm just finding it quite stressful. I'm worried about not being able to have somebody there to help me. Another thing is doing up the learning journals for the children. There's a lot of work in that and that can never be done during the school time, never. So, there's something a lot of us are doing in our own time but not getting paid for it."
(#19 Community, Part time with linked school age, Rural)

"I would work in the service about 40 to 50 hours per week on the floor, then Pobal, all that would be done at home in the evening times, or at the weekends, so I could have easily racked up 70 hours a week if not more and I was coming out with about €450 for myself (...) Being off has really made me realise how stressed and actually how unwell I really was from the anxiety of working in the service. So that's what made me question actually really if, I'm still questioning it, but I'll end up going back purely because I love the job."

(#11, Private, Full day-care, Leinster, Commuter area)

"Obviously the main thing is funding, of course (...) I'm 50-50 on whether I can keep this business going and this is even pre-Covid, now with Covid obviously is more difficult, between parents being a little bit iffy about sending their children, I don't know what my numbers are going to be like, it's very uncertain. I feel is a very uncertain future, so I'm quite anxious because of that and I just don't know if we can genuinely continue."

(#9 Private, Sessional, Leinster, Commuter area)

5. Conclusion

As one could expect, the main strategy used by participants to weather the lockdown was signing up to the Temporary Wage Childcare Subsidy Scheme (TWCSS). However, the interviews reveal important nuances of the policy. First and foremost, it was key to maintaining employment ties in the sector and in keeping settings afloat during the period. Despite these positives, the operational difficulties, and the lack of tailoring of the supports for overhead costs to specific types of settings were pointed to as serious weaknesses. Moreover, the interviews suggest that a lack of clarity and conflicting information from different sources was the main cause of providers choosing not to participate in the scheme. In this sense, the decision to not participate was resulted from failures in communication with providers, instead of any real problem with the scheme itself. A further shortcoming was related to eligibility rules that prevented settings that did not receive government subsidies before the pandemic to join the scheme.

Overall, when looking into the future, the Covid-19 pandemic added an extra layer of complexity to pre-existing problems. Take staffing, for example. According to Pobal (2019), more than half of services reported having challenges in recruiting qualified staff in 2018/2019. During the Covid pandemic, participants are expecting further recruitment difficulties, related to holidays, sick leave and increased staffing demands. Covid also created new problems, such as reduced levels of uptake and renewed challenges related to children's wellbeing. Not surprisingly, high levels of stress and anxiety among providers have been reported. However, the June reopening package was generally well received by participants, which suggests that government actions have been proportionate to the seriousness of the problem. The increased focus on the importance of the sector could help ease the tense relationship between the State and providers – but that will ultimately depend on future policy developments.

6. Next Steps

Early Childhood Ireland will continue to monitor and report on the impact of Covid-19 on members settings across Ireland. It is vital that policy makers are made aware of this and that they act on it. The importance of the care and education services provided by our members, has been brought into stark reality by the lockdown. Their fragility was also exposed and was acknowledged by government through a series of bespoke measures for the early learning and care and school-age care sector, which others did not receive. This focus on supporting and investing in our sector will need to continue throughout and after the pandemic.

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