

FAQ responses on public health and prioritisation - 1 January 2021

Q1: Is it safe to operate early learning and care and school-age childcare services at this time?

National public health experts have confirmed that it remains safe to continue operating ELC and SAC services. Service providers, staff and families are to be commended for the care with which they have been complying with public health guidance since reopening in June, and it remains essential that they continue doing so. A range of tip sheets and resource materials, including guidance specifically developed for ELC/SAC services by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) within the HSE, is available at <https://first5.gov.ie/guidance>

Q2: Are additional protective measures now required in ELC and SAC services?

The HSE has confirmed on Dec 31 that there is no change to the public health advice for early learning and care and school-age childcare settings, 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 providers, 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 (however extended that may have been over the recent Christmas period) 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 or SAC facility. 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 or SAC facility.

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 early learning and childcare settings 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 settings on how the HPSC guidelines are being applied and implemented by staff and within the setting.** [HPSC guidance on safe opening are available here](#) and we ask that all settings 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 setting 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.

Q3: Is the public health guidance for school-age childcare different from the guidance for early learning and care?

The same public health guidance applies to early learning and care settings and to school-age childcare settings.

Q4: What happens if there are suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19 among staff or children in my setting?

As you will be aware, the HSE has put in place specific arrangements for COVID-19 testing in schools, ELC and 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 Childcare Facilities remain in place and will clearly be focussed on responding to ELC and SAC settings.

[Weekly reports on mass testing in schools and ELC and SAC facilities 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.

Q5. Do I need to shut my service if a staff member or child is suspected to have COVID-19?

If a child/staff member in your setting 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 childcare setting 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 settings providing childcare during the COVID-19 Pandemic” in relation to cleaning rooms/settings 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 setting until the room is available again.

Q6: Will my funding continue if I have to close a Pod?

In the situation where the HSE has directed the service provider to close a Pod, the normal attendance rules apply where the Department will continue to fund for up to four weeks for that closure.

Q7: Will my funding continue if I have to close my service completely?

In the situation where the HSE has directed the service provider to close completely, the Department will approve force majeure. In circumstances where the closure order is solely related to a particular service provider and is not issued on a national or regional level, the Department will continue to fund that service while their force majeure is activated.

Q8: Will I lose ECCE funding if I am closed in the week of 4 to 8 January?

Funding for the ECCE programme will be paid in accordance with the funding calendar. If services are unable to make up the time later in the year, they will not be penalised, the funding they receive for the week 4 to 8 January will not be recouped.

Q9: Will I lose NCS or legacy scheme funding if children do not attend in early January?

Children may be absent from early learning and childcare services for at least 4 weeks without any change in subsidy levels. Funding under the NCS and legacy schemes will be paid to providers in accordance with the payment calendars. Providers are reminded to submit their NCS attendance returns on the Hive, as that return is the trigger for their NCS payment.

Q10: What restrictions apply if someone returns from travel overseas?

Public health advice remains that those arriving in Ireland from overseas should restrict their movements for 14 days post-travel. [Detailed advice from the Government regarding travel can be found at here](#), including specific guidance on travel from Britain.

The travel advice notes that ‘Those who intend travelling should be aware that individual workplaces, schools, childcare facilities and colleges in Ireland can apply their own health and safety measures. Intending travellers, as well as parents/guardians, should familiarise themselves with these requirements before booking any travel.’

Q11: Which children are allowed to attend an ELC or SAC setting at this time?

In line with restrictions announced on 30 December 2020 and the Plan for Living with COVID-19, early learning and care and school-age childcare services, including childminders, can continue to operate. While the resumption of the ECCE programme is delayed until 11 January 2021, non-ECCE programme provision (including full-day provision) can continue to operate, particularly to support priority groups and children of essential workers. [A list of essential services at Level 5 is available here.](#)

A range of effective protective measures have been in place in early learning and care and school-age childcare services since reopening in the summer and no additional protective measures are deemed necessary at this point in time. Staff and families are urged to continue to adhere strictly to public health guidance for the safe operation of services.

Given the prevalence of COVID-19 in the community, some services may be operating at reduced capacity due to unavailability of staff and the necessity to meet legislative adult child ratios. It is important to note that, as early learning and care and school-age childcare services are private businesses, the allocation of places is a matter for the service provider. This guidance is provided to help support providers in managing allocation of places in a situation where demand is greater than the supply available.

In the best interests of children and their families, children should, as far as possible, be enabled to remain in a service they have previously been attending. If a service has additional capacity, they may register new families who have not previously used the setting, either on a long-term or a short-term basis depending on the service's capacity.

If capacity is limited, **services are asked to prioritise the children of health and social care workers and other frontline workers**, where possible.

Services are also encouraged to support:

- vulnerable children sponsored under the National Childcare Scheme;
- children funded through legacy DCEDIY schemes who are experiencing poverty, disadvantage or child welfare issues; and
- children with additional needs who were attending full or part time early learning and care and may benefit from immediate re-engagement with this services after the Christmas break.

This guidance will be reviewed in advance of 11 January 2021.