

Guidance on prioritisation of childcare places - 1 January 2021

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 at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/>.

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.