

How Early-Years and School-Age Childcare Providers Dealt with the Pandemic



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This article introduces a qualitative study developed by Early Childhood Ireland aimed at assessing the impact of Covid-19 on Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare providers in Ireland, as well as providers' main concerns about reopening. The results assess the effectiveness of the Covid-19 supports and point to the many challenges that lie ahead.

The Covid-19 pandemic poses a serious threat to the sustainability of the Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare (ELC/SAC) sector in Ireland. In this challenging context, Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) developed a research project in summer 2020, with two main objectives: (1) to identify the strategies used by early years and school-age care providers to deal with the lockdown, along with their rationales for action, and (2) to identify their main concerns and considerations about reopening. Based on providers' views, the study explores the effectiveness of the Covid-19 supports and how the emerging challenges intertwine with pre-existing structural barriers to prevent the sector from operating successfully.

A qualitative enquiry was employed based on one-to-one semi-structured interviews. In order to develop a deep and inclusive understanding of a sector that is essentially diverse, a maximum variation sampling strategy was used. Twenty participants were recruited from Early Childhood Ireland's membership base, according to service type and location variables. The interviews were transcribed and coded according to content analysis, and the findings were published as a report, which can be accessed on ECI's website.

The results show that the main strategy used by participants to weather the lockdown was to sign up to the Temporary Wage Childcare Subsidy Scheme (TWCSS). The TWCSS was provided by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and complemented the Revenue-operated Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS). In other words, the government took over the responsibility for wages. Services were also entitled to receive support for overhead payments, amounting to 15% of eligible staff gross weekly pay, with a minimum payment of €300 per week.

The interviews reveal important nuances of the policy. First and foremost, the wage supports were the key factor in maintaining employment ties in the sector and in keeping settings afloat during

the period. Despite these positives, significant weaknesses were also cited, such as operational difficulties and the lack of tailoring of the supports towards overhead costs to specific types of settings. The overhead payment did not cover costs to the same degree in urban areas, where expenses such as rent are higher. This stands as a good example of the shortcomings of one-size-fits-all policy approaches.

The interviews clarify the reasons that some providers chose not to join the scheme. It is important to note that the take-up rate of the TWCSS corresponded to approximately 85% of registered providers (DCYA, 2020). Firstly, there was uncertainty over the length of the closure. The shorter the closure, the less a provider would lose out on the benefits of participating.

Secondly, there was a lack of clarity on the financial terms of the agreement and on the general information being given by the DCYA, which led to uncertainty about the scheme itself. This lack of clarity created confusion, which was compounded by conflicting information being shared on social media.

This way, the interviews suggest that the decision to not participate was caused by failures in communication between the government and providers, not by any real problem with the scheme itself. There were also cases where participation was not an option for providers. This was related to eligibility rules that precluded settings that did not receive government subsidies prior to the pandemic from joining the scheme.

Overall, when looking to the future, the pandemic has added an extra layer of complexity to pre-existing problems in the ELC/SAC sector. Take staffing, for example. According to Pobal (2019), more than half of services reported challenges in recruiting qualified staff in 2018/2019. During the pandemic, participants are expecting further recruitment difficulties. Interviewees pointed to the inevitable prospect of staff being absent from work more often, because of health and safety guidelines, and because many workers who would normally have taken their holidays during the summer will do so later in the year. The reopening requirements on pods and cleaning procedures also create new staffing demands.

Covid-19 has also created new problems. Reduced demand for services is a particular concern among rural providers. Providers also repeatedly expressed various concerns about children's mental and physical health. They questioned how they could be expected to differentiate between Covid-19 and non-Covid-19 illnesses in the absence of fast testing turnaround, and noted the impact this would have on the ability of their settings to operate.

Not surprisingly, high levels of stress and anxiety have been reported. However, the June reopening package was generally well received by participants. The package included a once-off reopening support payment, a once-off capital grant, continuation of the Revenue-operated TWSS, and resumption of the DCYA funding schemes. The continuation of the TWSS in particular was seen as essential to sustain the staffing requirements in the pandemic. The increased focus on the importance of the sector could ease the tense relationship between the state and providers – but this will ultimately depend on future policy developments.