

Minister O’Gorman announces gradual lifting of restrictions on delivery of early learning and childcare services from 8 March

As part of the COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead approved by Government today (23 February), Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth Roderic O’Gorman, T.D., has announced the gradual lifting of restrictions on the operation of early learning and childcare services, subject to continued improvement in the public health situation.

Since January, early learning and childcare services have been restricted to children of essential workers and vulnerable children only and the ECCE pre-school programme has been suspended.

As part of a careful and cautious reopening of priority sectors of society and the economy, early learning and childcare services will open for other groups of children throughout March on a phased basis.

- From 8 March, the ECCE Programme will reopen for all participating children; and
- From 29 March, subject to public health advice, other restrictions will be lifted so that all other children can return to early learning and childcare services (i.e. those that are not the children of essential workers or not vulnerable children).

From 8 March, there will be a return to normal funding arrangements under Department funding schemes. A Covid-19 Operating Support Payment (COSP) introduced in February will be extended until 26 March for eligible services. This will help to offset loss of parental fees for services which are highly reliant on private income.

Services continue to be eligible for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and are exempt from the turnover rule. The EWSS has been extended until end June.

Outlining the arrangements, Minister O’Gorman said:

“Since January, the early learning and childcare sector has continued to operate for priority groups. This has been a difficult period for everyone across the country, and I would like to pay tribute to staff, service providers, and parents for their efforts during this time.

It is our intention that the ECCE pre-school programme will resume from 8 March. This Programme significantly contributes to children’s early learning and development experiences and is particularly beneficial to children who have additional needs or experience disadvantage. It is also an important foundational stage that will prepare children transitioning to primary education this September.

Subject to public health advice, other restrictions on access to early learning and childcare will be lifted on 29 March so that all other children can return to services.

This cautious and phased reopening schedule is essential as we work towards a safe resumption of all early learning and childcare services.

Additional funding, based on the funding arrangements which were introduced from 1 February to 5 March, will continue until 26 March so that services can remain open, even at very low levels of occupancy. This will ensure services can continue to waive fees for parents not using a service at this time.”

Further information on the reopening schedule and the funding arrangements will issue to early learning and childcare providers on 24 February.

