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**To Management Committees, Owner/Managers, Preschool Leaders,
Practitioners and Other Staff of Early Learning and Care Settings**

**ARRANGEMENTS FOR INSPECTION OF EARLY LEARNING AND
CARE (ELC) SETTINGS FOR THE 2020/2021 ACADEMIC YEAR**

Please bring this circular letter to the attention of all relevant staff and to all members of management committees (where appropriate)

Summary

This note

- sets out adjustments to arrangements for Early Years Education Inspection that recognise the considerable challenges faced by owners, managers, management committees, preschool leaders, practitioners and other staff in Early Learning and Care (ELC) settings, as well as the children, parents and communities served by ELC settings in the 2020/21 academic year
- acknowledges the significant efforts made by owners, managers, leaders, practitioners and other staff in ELC settings to continue to engage with parents and children at home during the period of closure in 2020 and to prepare for and support their safe return
- provides information on the inspection and evaluation/research work of Early Years inspectors from the Department of Education and Skills in ELC settings in the 2020/21 academic year
- encourages ELC settings to engage in internal evaluation, review and planning processes informed by the national practice frameworks, *Aistear*, *the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* and *Síolta the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*, to address the challenges involved in the return to ELC settings in the 2020/21 academic year.

1. Context of this communication

In March 2020, the government closed all early learning and care (ELC) settings, schools and centres for education for public health reasons, due to the spread of COVID-19 (Coronavirus). This necessary but sudden measure did not allow for any time to put arrangements in place to prepare children, staff and parents for this unexpected transition to home based learning and working and the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Children and Youth Affairs recognise that the subsequent months have been challenging and stressful in many ways.

Both departments also recognise that many ELC settings have made extensive efforts to maintain contact with children and families and to provide support for children's well-being, learning and development where possible. Throughout the period, individual ELC settings and staff were able to make significant efforts to support children and parents at home and prepare them for the transition to the next stage in their learning journey, whether that be back to preschool or on to primary school.

Following the planned re-opening of ELC settings in line with public health advice, additional challenges are likely to emerge across a wide range of areas, including the organisation of the daily routines and children and staff wellbeing.

2. The Inspectorate's evaluation, research and support work in ELC settings in the 2020/2021 academic year

The Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills will adjust its programme of work to support ELC settings and the early years sector as the return to preschools takes place. The specific activities included in the Inspectorate's work will be kept under review and will evolve in line with public health advice and the prevailing health circumstances.

Research and Support

The main focus of the Inspectorate's work in ELC settings during the first term of the 2020/2021 academic year will be on research and support work. This work will support owner/managers, setting leaders and practitioners to provide effectively for the learning and progression of all young people – with a strong focus on the needs of vulnerable learners. Early Years inspectors will also work collaboratively with a range of agencies, nominated by DCYA, to provide information, guidance and support for their advisory work in ELC settings.

In this research and support work, Early Years inspectors from the Department of Education and Skills will seek to identify and disseminate examples of effective

practice where ELC settings have been successful in addressing the needs of learners following the return to ELC settings.

The research work will also seek to progress the development of the extended early years education inspection model to allow for evaluation of provision for children aged 0-6 years in line with the commitment of First 5.

All of this research work will seek to collect and use the perspectives of early years education professionals, setting leaders, managers, parents and learners to inform good practice throughout the ELC system.

The Inspectorate's research and support work will be conducted with ELC settings in line with public health advice. Settings will receive advance notice of any visits.

Inspection activity

During the first term of the 2020/21 school year, Early Years inspectors from the Department of Education and Skills will focus on research and support work as outlined above. Consequently the normal programme of inspection activity will not take place. Inspection activity will be confined to a small number of priority inspections, including: work to complete inspections commenced prior to 12 March 2020; urgent follow-through Inspections; and a limited number of other necessary inspections. Settings will receive notice of any visits for inspection purposes.

Further development

It is envisaged that research and support work will continue in the second and third terms of the school year 2020/21 and the Inspectorate is also planning for a carefully phased recommencement of a limited programme of normal inspection work in this period.

3. Completing the publication process for reports arising from inspections undertaken in 2019/20 year

When ELC settings closed on 12 March 2020, a number of inspection reports were being processed for issue to settings for either factual verification or setting response, in preparation for publication on the website of the Department of Education and Skills. As managers, owners and staff did not have access to setting buildings from 12 March 2020, none of these reports were issued. Whilst the government roadmap for reopening ELC settings, schools and centres has now been published and access to premises will be allowed, the Inspectorate is conscious that there are many pressures on ELC settings including the reopening of ELC settings for childcare at the end of June. In view of these demands on practitioners, leaders, and owners/managers, the Inspectorate has decided not to issue inspection reports for factual verification or

setting response at this time. These reports will issue to ELC settings at the beginning of the new academic year.

Reports that were ready for publication in March 2020 will be published shortly on the website of the Department of Education and Skills.

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