



Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures Advisory Council

Covid-19 Response

27 March 2020

The National Advisory Council for Children and Young People brings together a diverse range of interests from sectoral stakeholders in the domain of children and young people's policy and provision. It harnesses knowledge and experience from the community and voluntary sector, from academia and from independent experts and individuals who have specific expertise in working with and for children and young people. The Council's mission is to maximise the value of its individual and collective commitment, expertise and experience in supporting the achievement of the goals set out in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*.

The Council commends the leadership of our Taoiseach, members of Cabinet, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Government and State Agencies for the swift action taken to flatten the curve of this global pandemic. This is the greatest public health challenge our country faces in recent times and we wish to acknowledge the outstanding work that has been done to protect the health and safety of the people of Ireland.

We know the Government continues to work on solutions to address the impact of the social distancing restrictions. The National Advisory Council have come together to bring to your attention some of the concerns we have relating to how this crisis impacts on children, young people and their families. We also propose some solutions which would help ensure that the families who are struggling the most do not get hit the hardest by this public health crisis.

1. Access to food

Concerns

- We are concerned that parents will struggle to afford food for children and young people who previously would have received school meals. Children and young people are dependent on these meals throughout the day. However, the child cannot be looked at in isolation, there is a need to support the family, and to support children in all sectors including early years and youth services to provide these meals.
- We welcome the funding that has been made available for school meals and the fact that many vulnerable families such as those in homeless accommodation will be supported. We believe that the dissemination of schools meals will be critical and note that there are companies, organisations and service providers that provide the food and are available to deliver the meals to an identified location. The issue is how to get the meals to children in a non-stigmatising way and there is a need to identify multiple channels for delivery. The mechanics of this need to be thought out and acted upon.

Solutions

- We know that discussions are being held between DES, DEASP, DCYA and TESS, Tusla to identify how best to continue to support the school meals programme and how to utilise supports in place to deliver food to families. The redistribution of school meals will be vital.
- A grant for parents could be introduced (paid directly) to facilitate additional supermarket spend owing to children not accessing school meals. This could be done by providing a temporary top-up payment to families via the QCI. See section below on employment and income supports for more.
- There will be challenges getting food parcels to all families in need in a consistent way but all options need to be explored including distribution through Gardai or civil defence or using early years or youth service mini buses that are now not in use.
- One of the projects in the North East Inner City that supply meals on wheels to older people Monday to Friday are extending their hours to cover the weekends also – maybe this could be replicated or this structure used to get food to families with children.
- There have been instances where children and parents are not allowed into shops/supermarkets due to fears that children are ‘vectors’ of the virus. However, this is negatively impacting on certain family types particularly parenting on their own and children/young people themselves who have to do the shop for the family. This is indirectly discriminatory on the family status ground of the Equal Status Act. However, we understand that there are public health considerations to contend with and suggest that the private sector chose alternative measures that would not be discriminatory, such as allocating times for families to visit the shops or provide adapted click and collect facilities.
- There are 4,500 early years’ providers’ premises which are unused at present. These could be used as ‘hubs’ or central locations for people to access school meals or for providers to use as a central storage/distribution hub.

2. Education

Concerns

- Principals and teachers are working hard across the country to support children and young people’s learning at home. However, we are concerned that without schools being required to implement a standard structured approach, the outcomes for children will vary.
There is variation in relation to what schools are doing and what parents (and children/young people) are receiving from schools regarding educating children at home, continuation of the curriculum and assigned homework.
- There is a serious concern for very vulnerable children and young people and their education is being disrupted. Some parents from disadvantaged backgrounds may not have the capacity to support their children with homework and school due to literacy and/or other issues.
- There is a lot of fear and anxiety for students due to sit their Leaving Certificate and whether exams will be postponed and whether they need to study at all. A decision on State exams is needed from Government to provide clarity to these young people.
- Many children and young people will suffer from mental health and well-being issues during this time. Providing alternative supports will be important at the present time.
- A lot of children and young people do not have access to IT supports such as laptops, tablets smartphones which could help them with their education when schools are closed, this is more evident with children and young people in disadvantaged areas. Lack of broadband in poorer families and certain areas of the country is also a concern.

- Many parents with children who need additional supports such as play therapy, speech and language therapy have not been informed of how to proceed. There are concerns around children with additional needs not being able to go outdoors and not getting the supports they need. There is also concern that a lot of respite activities will not be available to families that need it.

Solutions

- An Education Connectivity Plan is needed to meet the needs associated with education for children and young people. The Department of Education and Skills (DES) could establish a technology grant to provide children and young people with laptops, ipads and broadband necessary to continue their education. Potentially schools could release their tablets and computers to families they know do not have access to devices. Linking with tech companies could also be important at the present time.
- Youth Services have been collecting old laptops and Camara have been re-conditioning laptops and smartphones which can then be delivered to children and young people. This could be replicated and scaled up. Extra funding for youth services to re-condition IT equipment would be very helpful.
- The State/DES need to clarify and confirm the position on whether the Leaving Certificate will be postponed. It is our view that the cancellation of exams should be a measure of last resort. Take the Junior Certificate for example, many young people leave school with only this qualification. A cancellation of the Junior Certificate will mean that a cohort of young people could have no qualifications at all.
- Teachers could dedicate 1 or 2 hours online for children and young people who have parents that are struggling with the curriculum. Working with DEIS Schools and the School Completion Programmes could help identify these children.
- Internet service providers/Tech companies/ IT providers should be asked to help by Government so Government can provide this broadband and IT equipment to children and young people directly.
- DES/DCYA could issue communications for young people around mental health as there is anxiety around what will happen next.
- In order to support a structured approach to children and young people's learning, the DES need to set out a guidelines and expectations for teachers about how to support children's continued learning. Parents also need guidance about what to expect from schools regarding the curriculum and homework.

3. Child Protection and Welfare

Concerns

- We are concerned about children who are currently on the Child Protection Notification System, in particular, children that are being worked with under Signs of Safety. We are aware that social workers are still working with vulnerable children and we commend the staff and management of Tusla for continuing this important work. However, in these situations the broader community plays a big role in keeping children safe including teachers, public health nurses, after schools clubs.
- We note that there has been an increase in calls to ISPCC Childline, many children and families dealing with domestic violence, addiction, abuse issues.

- We are concerned about the very vulnerable situations of children and families living in homeless accommodation are facing. This includes living in one room and having no other space to isolate and essential services such as laundrettes and places to eat being closed.
- There is a concern for children and young people whose parents die from Covid 19 or who are ill and what supports will be put in place for them as has arisen in Italy.
- Many parents are extremely concerned about access/contact visits between separated parents. This is a complex issue as court orders stand but there are strong public health implications also. Parents need support on this issue from specialist organisations to come to workable agreements.

Solutions

- We believe that Tusla needs more support from other professions and services in the community to keep children safe. We suggest alternative means are identified to support this important child protection work.
- There is a need to have a dedicated helpline for children to be signposted to supports. Services were doing this on a face to face basis but as they have since closed there is a gap for children and young people.
- We understand that Tusla and partner organisations are looking at contingency plans around what will happen to children where a parent is ill with Covid-19 and the usual carers are unwilling or unable to take the children in. The Council strongly supports this work and believes that the identification of alternative temporary care options will be critical going forward.
- An age appropriate activity package would be important for children in refugee centres and homeless accommodation similar to the play mat Dublin City North CYPSC and the Early Learning Initiative produced. The DCYA are reviewing additional funding and responses for CYPSC and we suggest that refugee and homeless children are prioritised in this endeavour.
- As a result of the crisis a lot of accommodation has become available in Dublin. There is an opportunity here to use this additional space and take families and children out of hotel accommodation/family hubs. This needs to be done in a strategic way where accommodation can be sustained.
- In terms of supporting access arrangements, FRCs or libraries could provide a planned space for parents who would have had outdoor/shopping centre contact with children. (This would not be permitted in the current circumstances. However it may be possible if social distancing restrictions are relaxed into the future).
- Some children and young people are having their meetings (such as child in care review meetings) go ahead via teleconference. EPIC has informed us that some children in care prefer the face-to-face contact given their vulnerable situation.

4. Employment and Income Supports

Concerns

- It is anticipated that real financial hardship will show in 11/12 weeks when the current measures end. The current rent supplementation may not cover actual rent for a lot of families and the process needs to be streamlined and moved online.
- There are difficulties for people in being able to print the forms required to have payments paid into banks instead of Post Offices as children are again being discouraged from certain Post Offices (although this is not policy).

- We are concerned about migrants accessing COVID payment and the impact of this on immigration status and pending or future applications for Irish citizenship by naturalisation.
- Many parents are reporting to us that maintenance payments (either voluntary or court ordered) have stopped. This is understandable in the current circumstances, however, this is in many cases bringing parents below the SWA rates. If a parent is in receipt of a means tested social welfare payment and are assessed based on child maintenance, we are asking that the payment is re-assessed once the parent notifies the local office. Family courts are no longer hearing child maintenance cases and we ask that the Department accepts the word of the parent until such time as courts resume normal operations.

Solutions

- There is a need to be more flexible regarding social welfare payments. We suggest that consideration be given to a fuel allowance for families for an additional month.
- There is a need for a more streamlined access to rent supplement.
- Online access to payments needs to be utilised more. Local organisations and Post Offices could have the forms printed for people to collect and fill out who cannot access a printer or who are being banned/ discouraged from entering the Post Offices with children.
- One way to help families with additional costs and protect them from further hardship, is to provide a temporary top-up payment to families via the QCI. Research from the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice could be used as a guide to determine the value of a temporary top-up payment on the QCI. The average weekly food, education, social inclusion and communication cost is €90 per week for the older child (secondary school 12+). Based on this data we could suggest a temporary top-up payment on the QCI of €30 euro for a child over 12 (33% of total cost) and a temporary top up payment of €15 for children under 12. The estimated cost of this measure would be €6.7 million per week or €81 million for 12 weeks.
- The Department of Justice and Equality could issue a statement that migrants will be eligible for the COVID payment and they will not be deemed in breach of their residence conditions or future applications for Irish Citizenship.
- Many parents are extremely concerned about access/contact visits between separated parents. This is a complex issue as court orders stand but there are strong public health implications also. Parents need support on this issue from specialist organisations to come to workable agreements.

5. Health

Concerns

- Mental health of children is a big concern due to social distancing and we need to identify how best services can support children and young people as well as their parents. Children cannot get outside as much and this is having an adverse effect on them. The current closures will also have an adverse effect on the mental health and well-being of children with additional needs, Autism and Down Syndrome.

Solutions

- Online counselling needs to be made available to support children and young people and for those with emotional difficulties. Some providers have already moved to provide this. We would suggest a coordinated effort to ensure that all children can benefit.

- For undocumented migrants a 'firewall' should be introduced whereby healthcare professionals do not share data re. migration status with INIS/DJE. Minister Coveney appeared to provide reassurance by way of reply to a Seanad question on this issue but a preferable solution may be for this to be raised with the HSE Vulnerable Persons Group and clearly stated on the HSE website in relevant sections, as currently there is nothing in this regard.
- A plan could be put in place in the event that there are further restrictions that will ensure that people with autism or people with anxiety or mental health needs can access outdoor spaces. Spain have a plan in place that provides for this.

6. Communications to children and young people

Concerns

- While we recognise and commend Government for their solutions-based approach, we believe that more needs to be done to communicate more clearly with children and young people. One example of this is the confusion and uncertainty around the state exams. Government should consider using different platforms to reach children and young people. In addition, children of different ages would benefit from a segmented and targeted communications approach.

Solutions

- As part of a segmented communications strategy, there is a need to reach out and communicate with children and young people on the platforms they use, i.e. Instagram, Fortnite, TikTok etc. Influencers could also be important for helping to reach children and young people. It would also be helpful if a strengths-based and positive tone was adopted when communicating with children and young people.
- We believe that children and young people could benefit from the appointment of one dedicated communications representative specifically for children and young people, someone they would know and who is in the public eye.
- We also suggest that specialist organisations could be encouraged to communicate widely to support parents who have children with additional needs.
- There is a visible support for older people, but this needs to include vulnerable children and families as part of the narrative.
- We recognise the Government's efforts to target different sectors of the population. We believe that it would be useful if all important communications could be translated into key languages, so no one is left behind.
- The President is rightly highly regarded by children and young people throughout the country. We would welcome an intervention addressed directly to children and young people during this time as communications to and about children and young people have sometimes been negative. However, we acknowledge the Minister for Health's efforts to speak directly to children about the virus.