

Dr Tony Houlihan  
Chair NPHET Committee  
Department of Health,  
Block 1, Miesian Plaza, 50 – 58  
Lower Baggot Street, D02 XW14

21 May 2020

**Re: Recommendations on Covid19 Pandemic and Children**

Dear Dr Tony, Houlihan and NPHET Committee Members,

The Children's Rights Alliance unites over 100 members with the goal of making Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We are writing to you in relation to the impact of Covid19 on children and young people in Ireland.

We would like to thank you and your Committee for the swift action taken to flatten the curve of this global pandemic. This is the greatest challenge our country has faced in recent times and we commend the work that has been done to protect the health and safety of the people of Ireland.

As we move from emergency crisis planning towards living with Covid19 for the foreseeable future, we wanted to highlight the impact of the social distancing rules on key aspects of children's lives. We understand that public health and medical considerations have been rightly driving the Government's response. However, as the State moves towards implementing the next phases of the Roadmap it needs to consider the range of children's rights that are being impacted including, for example, the fundamental right of a child to access education.

Children have been out of school for 10 weeks so far and they are facing another 14 weeks minimum before the phased return of schools in September under the final phase of the Roadmap. The prospect of children being out of school and early childhood care and education from anywhere between six to eight months is likely to lead to loss of learning, educational and development delays, school dropout, deterioration of behaviour and emotional regulation. These issues will be difficult to remedy. We would urge members of the Committee to reconsider reopening formal (schools) and non-formal (youth services) education settings. We understand that other European countries have devised systems to enable children attend formal/non-formal education while at the same time protect against the spread of Covid19. We recommend that everything be explored in the Irish context to get children back to school.

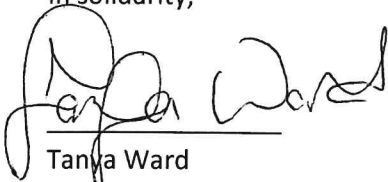
The closure of formal and non-formal education settings is also having a knock-on effect on the protection of children from abuse and neglect. Tusla has reported up to a 31% drop in child protection referrals including from teachers/educationalists. Teachers, youth workers and early years' educators play an important role in the child protection system. They are mandated persons under Children First legislation and are often the professional to identify deterioration in a child. The longer early years', schools and youth services remain closed, there is a strong likelihood that vulnerable children will be missed. When they eventually do open, it could lead to a demand surge that could overwhelm child protection services. We are also hearing from our members that families that have children with high level health needs or disabilities are struggling because respite and day-care is not available to them. There is concern that this could be causing a stressful toxic situation for parents who are at breaking point.

The closure of formal and non-formal education settings for the summer months is also having an acute effect on food poverty for vulnerable children. Children are generally fed in their DEIS school, early years' or youth work setting. During the shutdown, the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Employment and Social Protection continued the school meals programme so that children would not lose out. However, that programme will cease in the summer months and there is serious concern that children will experience hunger and malnourishment because they won't get fed in the summer programmes that normally would have attended in the summer months. There are nearly 100,000 children living in consistent poverty and they often experience hunger on a weekly basis. Opening up the different settings will go some way to address this issue or indeed running short summer programmes. The leading Youth Organisations are proposing running programmes outside with eight young people and two youth leaders. We would suggest a model like this be explored for all settings.

Lastly, children and young people's emotional wellbeing is of serious concern. When children are asked about what's the most important thing to them about school, they usually say friends and play. Children are feeling the loss of friendship and the society of other children and young people acutely at this stage. Our members are reporting high levels anxiety and stress among young people. Some have been able to continue to access mental health services online while others have not. Getting children back into schools, local youth services, sporting activities and cultural activities will be critical to maintain their social and emotional wellbeing. Consideration needs to be given to how these activities can be organised for children in a safe way in the summer months and into the future in the form of a children and youth roadmap.

We hope these observations and recommendations will be helpful and would welcome an opportunity to discuss these issues with you and your officials.

In solidarity,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tanya Ward', written over a horizontal line.

Tanya Ward  
Chief Executive